

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Strong Press, Strong Democracy

Look at Me!

A writer's search for journalism in the age of branding

MAUREEN TKACIK

INVESTIGATIONS: WILL THE NONPROFITS SURVIVE?

JILL DREW

THE LONGEST DAY AND THE DAWN OF NARRATIVE

MICHAEL SHAPIRO

THE LAST ROCK CRITIC STANDING

JUSTIN PETERS

A BLACK EDITOR AT THE GRAY LADY

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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

"Cashing In on Kids"

In her year-long series covering Wisconsin's child-care subsidy program, Raquel Rutledge exposed a system plagued by fraud, deceit and criminal activity which cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars and put children in danger. Her reporting led to criminal probes and indictments and prompted lawmakers to pass new laws aimed at eliminating fraud and keeping criminals out of the day care business.

FINALISTS

Sean P. Murphy

The Boston Globe

"Gaming the System: Public Pensions the Massachusetts Way"

Sean P. Murphy exposed how state officials used loopholes in the state retirement system to enrich themselves at taxpayers' expense. His investigation prodded the Massachusetts State Legislature to enact new pension laws. Two ex-legislators also renounced thousands of dollars in future pension benefits.

Mark Greenblatt, David Raziq, Keith Tomshe, Robyn Hughes and Chris Henao

KHOU-TV, Houston, TX

"Under Fire: Discrimination and Corruption in the Texas National Guard"

KHOU-TV exposed rampant sexual discrimination, abuses of power, cover-ups to Congress, financial corruption and theft by the National Guard's top commanding generals. As a result, the accused commanders were fired; the FBI and DA launched criminal probes and three new state laws have been passed, requiring better oversight of the Guard.

J. Andrew Curliss and Staff

The News & Observer (Raleigh, NC)

"Executive Privilege: The Perks of Power"

The News & Observer's year-long investigation of former North Carolina Governor Mike Easley revealed how Easley accepted numerous unreported gifts from supporters in return for political influence and "sweet deals." Their reporting launched state and federal criminal investigations, led to resignations and firings, exposed election law violations and spurred government reforms.

A.C. Thompson

ProPublica and The Nation Institute

In collaboration with Gordon Russell, Laura Maggi and Brendan McCarthy, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*; Tom Jennings, *Frontline* "Law and Disorder"

ProPublica's A.C. Thompson, in collaboration with journalists from The Nation, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* and PBS's *Frontline*, exposed the existence of white vigilante violence and questions about the New Orleans Police Department's use of deadly force in the days after Hurricane Katrina. This series provoked an FBI investigation resulting in a federal grand jury examining police conduct.

Joe Stephens, Lena H. Sun and

Lyndsey Layton

The Washington Post

"Death on the Rails"

Reporters from *The Washington Post* uncovered repeated lapses in safety in Washington's Metro subway system and a systemic breakdown in safety oversight. As a result of their series, the Metro has instituted sweeping reorganization and there has been congressional demand for reform. The federal government also announced it would move to take over regulation of subways and light rail systems across the nation.

SPECIAL CITATION

The Seattle Times

"4 Police Officers Slain"

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Matthew Hindman

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John Maxwell Hamilton

Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

May/June 2010



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"To assess the performance of journalism ...
to help stimulate continuing improvement
in the profession, and to speak out for
what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961

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Anthony Collings

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Roy J. Harris Jr.

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Parking lot floods when man bursts

The Herald-Sun, Durham, N.C. 02/04/94

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Opening Shot



BILL WIPPERT / THE BUFFALO NEWS

The crash of Continental Flight 3407 on February 12, 2009, killed forty-nine people on board and another on the ground. As a subsequent investigation—co-produced by *Frontline* and the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University's School of Communication—highlighted, Continental sold the tickets and the plane was painted in the colors of Continental Connection. But it was operated by a regional outfit that flew under contract for US Airways and United as well as Continental. Further, that low-cost, low-pay regional “codeshare” system—more than half of all domestic flights—is inadequately regulated, raising concerns on pilot quality, training, and fatigue. The Reporting Workshop/*Frontline* story is a good example of the investigative work increasingly being done by nonprofit outlets, as Jill Drew reports on page 22. One question is whether these outlets can sustain themselves. Another is, How much of the yawning gap in investigative and public-service reporting can these dedicated reporters fill? Not all investigative efforts at for-profit outlets have retreated, of course. On page 28, Lisa Anderson reports on a Texas television station that has made great investigative work part of what distinguishes it in a crowded field. We hope you enjoy these pieces, and the rest of the issue. **CJR**

Fatal Flight 3407 to Buffalo in February 2009 didn't make it. Pilot error is a probable cause, highlighting weak safety rules for regional “codeshares.”



The Hands That Feed

Managing conflicts of interest in the era of nonprofit journalism

The need to manage real and perceived conflicts of interest, and the self-censorship that can accompany them, has always been a part of journalism, whether it was a question of angering a major advertiser or exposing the shady dealings of the publisher's golf buddy. With the emergence of nonprofit news outlets, from ProPublica to the St. Louis Beacon, the delicate dance that managing these risks often entails gets a bit more complicated.

Unlike a traditional newsroom, which never has just one advertiser supporting it, these nonprofit outlets tend to rely—at least initially—on a single funder or small handful of funders. And while a typical advertiser's interests are fairly easy to discern, foundations (and universities, which are part of the nonprofit equation in some cases) are invested—directly and otherwise—in a range of issues and policies, not all of which are immediately obvious. This last bit is further complicated by the fact that in recent years foundations have shifted away from general-operating grants—basically a lump sum for the grantee to use as it sees fit—to targeted grants for projects that align with the foundation's specific interests.

CJR relies on foundation support, so we know something of the challenge these newsrooms face. We've had our credibility impugned based on who funds us (for evidence, see this issue's Letters pages), and we often wrestle with whether and how our editorial goals fit with the interests of potential

funders. Managing this challenge is not always simple or easy.

Ultimately, your credibility will be judged based on the work you produce. But that doesn't mean there isn't a need to think these things through. "This is a precarious moment," says Charles Lewis, who was a pioneer of nonprofit journalism when he founded the Center for Public Integrity in 1989. "It is a noisy, experimental time, and it is important to set clear standards."

Andy Hall and his colleagues at the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism are attempting to do just that. On April 30, at a conference in Madison sponsored by the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin, they presented a list of best practices for managing conflict-of-interest risks in nonprofit newsrooms. (The full document is available at www.journalismethics.info/2010_roundtable_report.pdf.)

Here are highlights from their list:

- Diversify the revenue stream, both in terms of the number of funders and their ideological bent.

- Be clear about the mission, so that funders understand what they are supporting. "We had one major foundation turn us down because they were looking for specific public-policy outcomes," says Hall. "They realized they couldn't attach those strings to us."

- Proximity matters. The closer the funder is, physically, to the news outlet it funds, the more complicated the relationship. Hall likens it to the situation that small-town newspapers have always faced, in which the biggest advertiser may live next door to the editor.

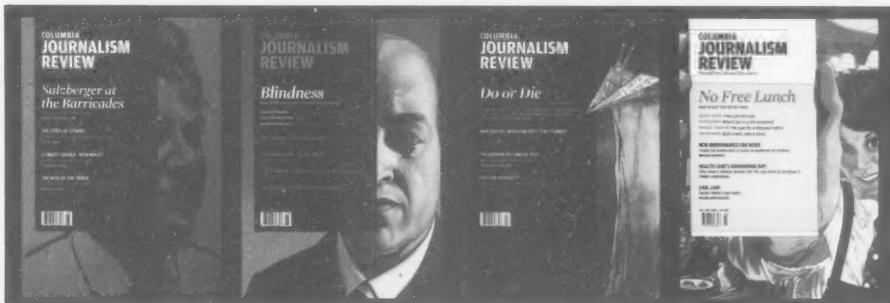
- Transparency—real transparency, not just the rhetoric of it—about where the money comes from is crucial.

Hall, a veteran investigative reporter who started the center in 2008, describes the list as a working document that will evolve. At the other end of the equation, we encourage foundations to be sensitive to the needs of accountability journalism. In other words, don't get in this game if you are simply looking for a platform for your ideas; get in it because you believe in the centrality of independent journalism to a free society.

Whether nonprofit newsrooms will be a significant part of the future of journalism in this country, or just a bridge to something else, they are a promising development in the effort to sustain serious reporting. We hope they are here to stay, part of a mix of funding models, both nonprofit and market-based, to take root. But as they evolve, they need to sweat the details. Journalists—even those in nonprofit newsrooms—are still nothing without their credibility. **CJR**

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LETTERS

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Is Fox Faux?

Whenever someone tries to point out that cable news, and Fox News especially, is in the business of getting ratings and advertisers, and to that end uses sensationalism and lies, its defenders come back with a weak "Well, you're the mainstream media and therefore clearly a whiny liberal" argument. And if you follow this to its logical conclusion, there can be no news, only endless spectacle and empty words.

The fact of the matter is that there is something called journalism, with a code of ethics and mechanisms to minimize bias. And there are still people who practice it, including Terry McDermott, the author of CJR's cover piece ("Dumb Like a Fox," March/April), no matter how many ideologues claim otherwise. If you really want to make an argument that journalism is dead, you'll have to do better than ranting and name-calling.

Laura Krier

Walla Walla, WA

The GOP base may appear to have narrowed, as Terry McDermott characterizes it in "Dumb Like a Fox." But Gallup has self-described "conservatives" outpolling self-described "liberals" by forty to twenty-one; insofar as orthodox pundits identify "conservatism" with the Republican Party, they are missing the point once again—as the string of victories posted by the supposedly dead Republicans since the Obama administration took office suggests; and as the success of Fox News vis-a-vis MSNBC suggests. Fox has mastered cable news in the sense that Fox got to a huge underserved portion of the news-consuming public (most followers of the news tend to be older, male, white, and conservative) before its competitors knew what hit them.

Mark Richard
Columbus, OH

Cutting Loose

Victor Navasky's survey of magazines and their Web sites ("A Tangled Web,"



If you're making an argument that journalism is dead, you'll have to do better than ranting and name-calling.

CJR, March/April) was painful to get through.

This is so simple. We publish. We got into this because we love writing and editing and showing off what we know and what we can do and all that editorial entails, just like other journalists. We try to do it as well as we can, and we're not so constrained by production as print, so we try to do it as often as we can, too. It's fast. It's a marathon. It doesn't take breaks. I don't know any full-time Web editors who don't work every weekend and evening just for the sake of making their sites better. We have so much to do with so little.

And no, we don't need to post an editor's note every time we fix a typo, but yes, we do make a note when we correct a factual error.

We try to beat our competitors. So we're not going to wait for an assembly line of editors to get through a story be-

fore we post it. We try to get the facts straight. And, obviously, we try to create a valuable resource for our readers.

We care about editorial integrity, and, when the need arises, we fight against the sales and marketing staff and pressure from vendors and pressure from corporate to try to maintain it. We care about style. We care about consistency. We care about developing voice. We are often subject-matter experts in addition to being trained journalists. We can't always deliver. We sometimes fail. It's frustrating to have to explain this kind of stuff over and over.

David Nagel
Executive editor
campustechology.com, thejournal.com
Irvine, CA

This is a worthwhile study. I think in many ways it mirrors what's been going on in the newspaper industry—similar questions about standards, business models and profitability, and the relative lack of editing and online expertise.

I'd like to comment on one point mentioned briefly in this article but explored in greater depth in the full report. There's a clear implication that staffing and online expertise are big issues. Much is made about how prior Web experience does not seem to be a significant criterion in hiring. I agree that it's a good idea for the Web operations of print media to have staff who have more technical expertise. But it's not necessarily problematic that many staff members who work "at least some of the time" for the Web don't have Web experience. Many, if not most, newspaper reporters and editors work "at least some of the time" for the online product. If you look at what they are doing, though, you'll find that many, if not most, are doing very little that requires much, if any, prior Web experience—writing news stories and updates, producing photo galleries, blogging, etc. I

suspect the same thing occurs in magazines. For people who work in more Web-technical areas—coding, interface development, multimedia reporting and production—Web experience would be much more important.

John Russial
Eugene, OR

Tuned In

Thanks for a very good read about a wonderful organization and its new leader, Vivian Schiller ("NPR Amps Up," CJR, March/April). We are appointment listeners of NPR. Sunday afternoons are the best as my wife and I share preparing dinner. Very cool.

Jay and Valerie Suber
Atlanta, GA

Vivian Schiller is sending the right signal to NPR staff and local stations—it may be an anarchic system, as Ruth Seymour of Santa Monica's KCRW says, but it is a system with interlocking parts. Where

one succeeds, all succeed. What local stations must do is focus on bringing superb journalism to their communities. (Some will choose music, and that's fine.) It's the historic underdevelopment of news resources at the local stations that makes NPR's assistance both vital and challenging. For stations, these are the best and worst of times—but the time to get it right seems to be in short supply.

Michael V. Marcotte
Santa Barbara, CA

The news portion of NPR will thrive if it focuses on gathering and disseminating facts and reasoned analysis. Don't chase ambulances and don't follow other reporters to the day's or week's sensational new story, no matter how big it is. We can get our fill of such "news" elsewhere. The recent report of an analysis of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's database of sudden acceleration complaints is a good exam-

ple of what NPR News should be doing. It's not expensive (no flying reporters around the world), but very high value. Get good at collecting, analyzing, putting in context, and reporting the facts, and listeners will beat a path to your door. No one else is doing it.

Warren Tighe
Walnut Creek, CA

Take a Leap!

I grew up reading *Ebony* and *Jet*. Don Terry's article ("An Icon Fades," CJR, March/April) does a good job of nailing the point that *Ebony* is an institution that resisted change. The inertia *Ebony* failed to overcome was fear. That same fear is what will cause it to take its last breath.

Overcoming the fear means taking bold risks: the kind of risks angel investors and venture capitalists take. If you glance in their direction, you see billions poured into Internet innovations. If you look in the room where those ideas are

NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

PETER BAKER, IN HIS NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE article about Rahm Emanuel, told his readers that Emanuel declined to talk to him "on the record for this article." Blogger Kevin Drum then asked, "Isn't this basically a big trumpet that says Emanuel did talk to Baker, but only off the record? Is that kosher?" Taking Drum's lead, we asked in our March 9 News Meeting, how long you should talk to someone off the record when they refuse to go on; and, if that conversation shapes your reporting, are you obligated to let readers know?

First: It doesn't matter what we say, what CJR says, what critics of the practice argue, or even what the policies of the newspapers involved are.

Reporters in D.C. grant anonymity when sources won't go on the record. Period. They will continue to do so. When criticized they will say, "Of course we want them to go on the record, and we press them hard on that, but when they won't, they won't! What are we supposed to do?"

I'm not aware that the professional conversation about confidential sources has ever moved beyond this point, despite all the forums like this one.

Granting anonymity to sources is by definition a decision that bargains away the public's right to know, on terms the public cannot know about. There's no way for the reader of the account to tell whether the bargain the reporter made was a good one or a bad one.

Therefore, confidentially sourced journalism is "trust me" journalism, more so than other types of reporting that carry within the account the means for judging whether the account is trustworthy. Thus, the opposite of "trust me"

journalism is not the untrustworthy kind but "...don't believe me? Check it yourself" kind. This is exactly what we cannot do when sources speak anonymously.

Where's the line, you ask? (Which, by the way, is the all time, hands down, number one champion CJR question, having been asked far more than any other.) I'll bite: When the identity of the source plus the fact that the source can't or won't speak publicly are, taken together, more significant, more newsworthy than whatever information or insight the source provided, then a bad bargain has been struck.

But again, we can't know when bad bargains are struck in our name, so we're back to "trust me" journalism. The one way we could (sometimes) know is if reporters who suspect that a bad bargain was made tried to do some reporting on who the confidential sources were, but this is very hard to do and anyway a gentleman's agreement is in place that says: You don't investigate who my sources are and I won't dig into yours, deal?

Deal!

As an observer of the Washington press, I am not that interested in the "ethics of confidential sources" debate, for the reason I stated. No matter what we say, reporters are going to continue the practice, and when challenged, come back with, We try to get them on the record but when they won't, they won't! What interests me more are the psychic rewards of the savvy style, which predispose reporters like Peter Baker and Dana Milbank (they're buddies) to Rahm's point of view. The creeping insiderism is greatly aided by the off-the-record discussions Rahm is known to have with many reporters. Why do the savvy look with such contempt on clueless outsiders?

I'll let you figure it out. — Jay Rosen



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being presented, you'll see a not-so-shocking revelation: few, if any, blacks.

Ebony doesn't need to change or lose its brand. It needs to modernize its brand. The end may be near, but help is right around the corner, if only someone at *Ebony* would open the closed doors of history and let the future flow in some fresh innovation.

Mike Green
Medford, OR

New Money

I was appalled by your recent "Editor's Note" (CJR, March/April). You discuss the debate between the "deficit hawks" and those who think a short-term deficit is proper for these economic times. You also discuss the need for "clear reporting" on the debate, and then go on to announce that the work of Holly Yeager, CJR's first "Peterson Fellow," will offer that reporting on CJR.org.

Perhaps "clear reporting" should start with the fact that Peter Peterson is a Wall Street billionaire and former Nixon cabinet member who has for the last two decades engaged in a campaign to slash Medicare and Social Security benefits by peddling fear stories about the deficit. His foundation supports *The Fiscal Times*, which, according to economist Dean Baker, was created to promote Peterson's explicit agenda.

Peterson is not an unbiased party, but an unmitigated deficit hawk. For you to announce a Peterson Fellow as the person who will guide us through the debate without the slightest mention of the history of Peter Peterson is an outrage.

Tom Dobrzeniecki
Costa Mesa, CA

Mike Hoyt responds: The *Columbia Journalism Review* is the first to concede that the philanthropic model for financing journalism isn't problem-free (see Jamie Kalven's article on this subject on page 14 and our editorial about it on page 4). In terms of avoiding conflicts, this model probably isn't as good yet as the old advertising- and subscription-based model, which was and is far from conflict-free. At the same time, the philanthropic model increasingly supports great and necessary journalism (see Jill Drew's article on page 24). All journal-

ists—including those at CJR—can do is be transparent, recognize potential conflicts, and try to manage them.

But here are a few things to think about. First, Holly Yeager works for us, CJR, so there's a difference from *The Fiscal Times* (which also doesn't deserve instant condemnation, by the way, despite a rocky start). Second, funders have zero say in whom we hire. Third, while Yeager's work is paid for by the Peterson Foundation, the foundation makes up a sliver of our overall budget. So we have a lot to lose by allowing our independence to be compromised, and very little to gain from that. Fourth, we're not stooges and don't make a habit of hiring any.

Our full list of major funders runs below this response, and there are other funders, too. For example, Drew's piece and Lisa Anderson's on page 30 were made possible by The Atlantic Philanthropies, which has sponsored our four Encore Fellows this year, including Drew and Anderson. We've had donations from Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, too, for The Audit, the business desk on which Yeager works. I don't think anyone seriously believes we've altered our coverage to suit them. CJR's funders know the rule by which we play: intellectual honesty.

Disqualifying someone because of a funding source is a slippery slope. We should all avoid the Red Queen syndrome—you know, verdict first, trial later. Readers can judge Yeager's work—and all our work—on its merits. We're confident it will be judged as high in quality—and independent.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW DIDN'T ENTER journalism contests. The philosophy, I guess, was that CJR should float somewhere above such earthly desires. Why, I have no idea. We're happily in the scrum now. One pleasing result: CJR is the winner of this year's Bart Richards Award for Media Criticism. Presented annually by the College of Communications at Penn State, the award cites three separate cover packages in 2009 about the economic threat to serious reporting—and what might be done about it—and also a single piece by Dean Starkman about the performance of the business press in the years before the meltdown.

We're honored, and would like to publicly thank the writers involved:

- In "Do or Die: Journalism's search for a support system" (March/April): Charles M. Sennott, Charles Lewis, Carroll Bogert, Adam Davidson, David S. Bennahum, Michael Stoll, Peter Osnos, John Yemma, Amanda Michel, and John F. Harris.
- In "No Free Lunch: How to split the tab for news" (July/August): Alissa Quart, Peter Osnos, Michael Shapiro, and David Simon.
- In "The Reconstruction of American Journalism" (November/December): Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson, with Alan Rusbridger, Jan Schaffer, Paul Starr, and Martin Langeveld.
- And for the other entry honored, "Power Problem" (May/June): Dean Starkman, who runs The Audit, our online business desk at CJR.org, as well as the two people who helped him classify hundreds of articles to build his formidable critique, former intern Megan McGinley and former staff writer Elinore Longobardi. Also, thanks to the Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute for supporting this piece.

Meanwhile, four CJR writers are finalists in the fourth annual Mirror Awards, for excellence in media-industry reporting, to be given in June by Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. They are:

- Starkman, again, for "Power Problem," best in-depth piece/traditional media;
- Justin Peters, our managing editor/Web, two nominations for best profile writing/digital media;
- "Regret the Error" columnist Craig Silverman, best commentary/digital media;
- And finally, former staff writer Megan Garber (now of Nieman Lab), best single article/digital media, for "Common Knowledge," from our online series, Press Forward: Dialogues on the Future of News.

WHILE WE'RE THANKING PEOPLE, WE'D LIKE TO THANK THE PARTICIPANTS OF a particularly illuminating panel discussion about the meaning of the Pentagon Papers case, and invite you to watch it.

The New York Times first printed stories based on the Pentagon's detailed secret history of the war in Vietnam on June 13, 1971, and *The Washington Post* soon followed, setting up a monumental court battle between the newspapers and the government. Unlike the *Times*, the *Post* had only a short time to absorb the material, and the story of the *Post*'s dramatic decision to proceed is dramatized in a lively play that ran in New York in March called *Top Secret: The Battle for the Pentagon Papers*, by Geoffrey Cowan and the late Leroy Arons.

Columbia Journalism Review hosted a benefit performance in mid-March, and the discussion followed. It featured some of the people most directly involved in the Pentagon Papers case. They are:

- Daniel Ellsberg, the former Pentagon official who leaked the papers;
- Leslie Gelb, project director for the Pentagon Papers and Ellsberg's boss;
- James Goodale, former general counsel for the *Times*, who argued successfully for publication;
- Nicholas Lemann, dean of Columbia's journalism school and a former *Post* reporter.

CJR's chairman, Victor Navasky, moderated the panel, which was taped by C-SPAN. It's fascinating, and you can view it on C-SPAN's Web site or view our version at www.cjr.org/video/.

—Mike Hoyt

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7.19-7.23: ONLINE

"Unlocking Financial Statements" with University of Kansas journalism professor Jimmy Gentry.

8.9-8.13: ONLINE

"How to be an Entrepreneur as a Business Journalist" with freelancer Maya Smart and "Ask the Recruiter" blogger Joe Grimm.

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Currents



Pictures For Peace

HOW SHOULD THE PRESS cover war? As the editor of the *Nepali Times*, Kunda Dixit reported on the decade-long conflict between Maoist guerrillas and state forces in his native country in traditional terms: territory gained, casualties incurred. But over time, he came to believe “we were not doing our jobs”—because the conflict’s toll on ordinary people was going unreported. In 2006, he put out a call for pictures that told that story. The resulting images—including the one of Juna Rai (right), who served with the guerrillas—became *A People War*, a book and photo exhibit seen by hundreds of thousands of Nepalese as the war was ending. Two years later, when Dixit and his colleagues tracked down the



subjects of the photos, they learned that Juna had fought against her brother Bhurban, an army soldier, at several battlefields. A photo of the reunited siblings and their

father (above) graced the cover of a follow-up, *People After War*. See more photos at www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/pictures_for_peace.php.

Food Fighter

IN 2004, TOM PHILPOTT QUIT his job as a financial journalist in New York City and moved with his girlfriend and her sister to take over their father’s farm in North Carolina. Today, Maverick Farms is an educational nonprofit that promotes family farming as a community resource. Philpott is also a food columnist for Grist Magazine, where he is one of the few American journalists to confront the class issues that permeate our food system. CJR’s Brent Cunningham talked to him in March. A longer version of the interview is at http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/food_fighter.php.

What does class have to do with the effort to change the way food is produced and consumed in this country?

First, if you start with the idea that our food system is broken and you want to build a movement to reform it, one thing you have to confront head-on is that the food industry is one of the largest employers in the U.S., and paradoxically the people working in the food system tend to be among the lowest-paid workers in the country—I’m talking about farm workers, the meat packers. So you’ve got this army of workers who get paid very little and, when it comes to food, can really only afford the cheapest crap. The

'I'm almost ashamed to admit this, but I don't even have a subscription to *The New York Times* anymore. I did for many years and I guess I'll get a subscription once they go to a pay model. As a paper, there's so much in there it's become hard to keep up with.'—Ta-Nehisi Coates, TheAtlantic.com

second lens is how, since the 1970s, wages adjusted for inflation have stagnated, while at about the same time—not coincidentally—the USDA switched policies and started encouraging farmers to grow as much food as possible, and you get this long period of declining food prices. I don't think you can run an economy with structurally stagnated wages without food being really cheap—because it depends on those cheap workers.

To the extent that class does surface in the food debate, it tends to be about whether organic food is too expensive for the masses.

Right, and also in this issue of personal responsibility. I believe you can eat cheaply without resorting to processed foods, but you have to keep in mind the structural things that keep processed food so available and so easy and so cheap. People like Michael Pollan [author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*] and Alice Waters [the doyenne of the sustainable-food movement] are capable of lapsing into this personal-responsibility critique, and I think it is so limited. And when they do, the journalists covering them don't press them on it. There's a long tradition of blaming the poor for their problems. Part of me just doesn't want to begrudge someone who has some awful job a cheeseburger.

The key, as you argue, is to make healthy choices more accessible to people. That's a massive job. Do you ever feel you are tilting at windmills?

Absolutely. Because I feel like there's so much cultural and economic momentum behind the status quo. Take something like cooking skills. I don't hark back to some golden age—I mean, Julia Child grew up with servants—when everyone used to cook and now they don't. But it's undeniable that fewer people than ever cook regularly—that skill has been widely lost and regenerating it is no easy task; the culture of convenience is so ingrained. And so yeah, I do get discouraged. But what kind of knocks me out of that is when I stop thinking about a big solution—our intellectual

Give me an example.

Someone like Will Allen, who started Growing Power in Milwaukee. This guy's been at it for almost twenty years, and he's trained a whole lot of people how to grow food in small places; he's reintroducing the culture of fresh food, of home cooking, into places where the economy has cratered, and the food culture cratered with it. If we could look at the things Allen has done that work as a model, that's where I think you could get some traction.

Like what?

Taking unused urban land and doing intensive agriculture on it. The Will Allen style, or what's called French Intensive. In the nineteenth century in France, and really all of Europe, there was a land crunch and agricultural productivity was declining. In the cities, and even in the countryside, people figured out a way to grow a lot of food in a really small space that wasn't resource-intensive. You build up compost so you have really fertile soil, and you plant really close together so your crops create a canopy that crowds out weeds—because your soil is so fertile you can get away with planting so close together. An incredible amount of fertility, in the form of food, is brought into the modern American city, and people eat it and it goes into the sewage system and that creates this pollution problem that is dealt with at great expense.



culture has a tendency to do that—and think about it in terms of small solutions, plural. There are people working on this on the ground. I think some of the little projects I often write about can be models for effective public policies.

HARD NUMBERS

47 percent decline, in inflation-adjusted dollars, in newspaper ad revenue from 2006 to 2009

13,500 newsroom jobs lost at daily newspapers in the U.S. between 2007 and 2009

17 percent of U.S. ad revenue in 2009 generated by online sales, up from 8 percent in 2005

12 percent decline in online ad revenue at newspaper sites in 2009; industry-wide, online ad revenue declined 3.4 percent

465 newspapers responding to an industry survey that reported having no full-time minority employees; all but one had circulations below 50,000

0 traditional print media outlets among the top ten news sites that draw the most traffic from Facebook

2 Michael Jackson's rank on a list of "Lead Newsmakers of 2009," based on a survey of media coverage. Barack Obama was first; Bernie Madoff was sixth

80 full-time fact-checking and research positions at the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, making the department five times larger than the fact-checking staff at *The New Yorker*

12 billion approximate number of tweets as of April 14, when the Library of Congress announced that it had acquired the entire Twitter archive. At the time, Twitter was processing an estimated 55 million tweets per day

Newspaper Association of America, American Society of News Editors, Nieman Journalism Lab, Interactive Advertising Bureau, Hitwise, Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, CJR.org, Gigatweet, Twitter

And then you've got all this food waste that generally goes into landfills. Allen captures the waste stream and turns it back into soil fertility to feed these intensive beds. That could happen in any city. We've got a water policy and an electricity policy. We need a food policy.

A New Start

SAIF ALNASSERI STEPPED out into a winter morning, stood on the wide front porch outside his apartment in a rambling house in suburban New Jersey, and pointed with pride to the view.

Here, he said, he and his family could sit in the sun, have a barbecue, and enjoy their new neighborhood—the overhanging trees, the large, close-set homes, and, a short walk away, the pharmacy where he works as a technician. And it was here that, for the first time since leaving Iraq, they finally began to feel settled.

The past year hadn't been easy for Alnasseri, a slim, earnest thirty-one-year-old who six years earlier had joined the Baghdad bureau

of the *Los Angeles Times*. So on a Sunday in February, as his mother poured sweet, strong Turkish coffee for family and guests including Tina Susman, the *Times's* former Baghdad bureau chief, he was happy to show off his new life, and to tell his story.

He was working as a pharmacist in Iraq in 2004 when a friend employed by the *Times* asked if he would be interested in a translator's job. "I said, 'I don't know anything about journalism. My only skill is that I speak English and am interested in politics,'" recalled Alnasseri. "He said, 'Perfect. This is what we want.'"

After living under a dictator, he said, it was exciting to be part of a free press and to witness the making of history. Alnasseri's favorite assignment came in summer 2008, when he and correspondent Doug Smith were embedded with U.S. Marines in Ramadi as the transfer of power to local authorities began. "We were able to interview people who were really influential in the whole transition that nobody had interviewed before," he said. These sto-

ries, about efforts to restore order to a fractious nation, are too often overlooked, he added later.

But when a special visa program began to allow Iraqis who had worked for American interests to come to the U.S., Alnasseri and his wife, Zeinab Alrubaie, decided to apply. "We wanted a better future for our child," he says. "It was civil war. This was not the place we wanted to live." In December 2008, they and their daughter Sarah, then two years old, moved in with Alrubaie's sister in New Jersey.

The transition wasn't easy. Besieged by a harsh winter, the dismal economy, and the isolation of suburbia, the family was soon reconsidering its decision. Before long, Alnasseri found himself applying for welfare benefits. On the day before the Super Bowl in 2009, as their new country readied for an unofficial holiday, he and Alrubaie decided to return to Baghdad. At least there, he says, despite the danger, "everything was in our reach."

The next morning, Alnasseri woke prepared to buy

tickets back to Iraq. Before he could, he received a call from a Walgreens an hour away, asking him to come in for an interview. The call—arranged by Philip Sweeney, who heads the Central N.J. chapter of The List Project, a nonprofit group that helps Iraqis settle in the U.S.—"changed the direction of our lives," Alnasseri said.

He got the job, and their life in New Jersey has taken shape. They found an apartment close to work—Sweeney co-signed the lease—and Alrubaie landed a job in another pharmacy. Soon her mother, Layla Alshawi, arrived from Iraq. While Alnasseri and Alrubaie study for their certification as pharmacists, Alshawi helps care for Sarah.

He no longer chases scoops or jobs in journalism, but Alnasseri still follows the news from Iraq. Word that Baghdad's Hamra Hotel, where the *Times* bureau is located, was bombed in late January sent him into a panic until he learned that his former co-workers were safe. Sitting in the parlor, he and Susman, now a New York-based national correspondent for the *Times*, traded news of those colleagues, including the friend who first helped him land the job. And they reminisced about their time together in Baghdad—the long, intense days covering one of the most difficult stories either of them will ever know. "All of us got married when we were there in the office; all of us had children when we were there; some of us lost beloved ones," Alnasseri said. "It was five years that will affect my life forever."

—Vera Haller

For an audio slideshow featuring Alnasseri, go to www.cjr.org/short_takes/a_new_start.php

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TWO WORDS USED TO BE SYNONYMS, LATER CAME TO MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS, AND ARE STARTING TO BE USED AS SYNONYMS AGAIN.

Yes, it sounds *incredible*, or *incredulous*, yet, as hard as it is to believe, they are often confused. As the *New Oxford American Dictionary* says, "Believability is at the heart of both *incredible* and *incredulous*, but there is an important distinction in the respective uses of these two adjectives."

"*Incredible*" means "not credible; unbelievable," or "seeming too unusual or improbable to be possible," according to *Webster's New World College Dictionary*. "*Incredulous*" means "unwilling or unable to believe; doubting; skeptical," or "showing doubt or disbelief." "*Incredible*" applies more to situations or events, and "*incredulous*" more to emotions or attitudes.

Back in the seventeenth century, writers frequently used them interchangeably. But, as *Garner's Modern American Usage* points out, "the differentiation between them has long been settled." Still, people misuse "*incredulous*" when they mean "*incredible*" frequently enough that the differentiation is starting to disappear again. One state senator was quoted as saying that the need for a special session was a "dismal, *incredulous* debacle."

It would be *credulous* to think it's possible to stop the slide to their becoming synonyms again. But, believe me, we should try.

—Merrill Perlman



LAUREL

Complaints about Toyota and Lexus cars suddenly accelerating out of control began surfacing about a decade ago, and a series of inconclusive federal investigations followed.

But despite the reams of auto coverage churned out by the automotive press and in the ad-rich auto sections of newspapers, this life-and-death story wasn't broken until it had become nearly impossible to ignore. And then it was a business reporter on the auto-industry beat who dug in and pieced it all together. The *Los Angeles Times'* Ken Bensinger, with the help of national reporter Ralph Vartabedian, produced a **LAUREL**-worthy series of more than fifty stories, even as Toyota—the world's largest automaker, with a reputation for producing reliable vehicles—denied that the runaway cars could be caused by faulty electrical systems.

Bensinger and Vartabedian's coverage (which was a finalist for a Pulitzer this year) began with a piece published on October 18, two weeks after Toyota issued a recall connected to a San Diego crash that killed an off-duty California Highway Patrol officer and three of his family members. Toyota blamed the car's sudden acceleration on floor mats that it said caused the gas pedal to stick.

That first article almost didn't happen. The day of the first Toyota recall in September, Bensinger was busy on what was considered a bigger auto-beat story: GM's decision to discontinue its Saturn line. But Toyota's floor-mat excuse didn't sound right to him. Musing about it in his backyard that weekend, he decided to follow his gut.

Using public documents on the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration Web site, Bensinger examined all the complaints about sudden acceleration and Toyota. He called his editor right away. "It was an amazing group of data," he says. "I can't believe no one did anything with it before—it doesn't take a genius to connect these dots."

Bensinger and Vartabedian's first story showed that the government had received hundreds of complaints about sudden acceleration in Toyota vehicles and had launched, and largely dismissed, nine investigations over the past decade. Their second story showed that Toyota accidents caused by sudden acceleration had claimed nineteen lives since 2002—more than all other manufacturers combined. (NHTSA later raised that number to thirty-four, after old incidents came to light, spurred by the reporters' coverage.)

The duo found that for some Toyota models, reports of unintended acceleration increased more than five-fold after 2001, when Toyota started building cars with "drive-by-wire" acceleration systems, which replaced traditional mechani-

cal hardware, like steel cable, with computerized sensors, microprocessors, and electric motors.

They also delved into how NHTSA investigations were conducted, and found them lacking. Many auto writers had done routine news stories about NHTSA investigations into runaway Toyotas and the subsequent recalls over the years, but no one had questioned the agency's conclusions. Indeed, some auto writers who remembered Audi's sudden-acceleration recalls in the 1980s, and an infamously doctored *60 Minutes* report that faked the problem in a test drive, were hesitant to touch the Toyota story, and as public attention mounted even defended the company.

But the failure of the press to catch the Toyota story earlier says something about the state of auto coverage, specifically, and journalism broadly. In our last issue, we wrote about how the general failure of news outlets to follow up on stories belongs on a list of systemic problems in journalism. The assumption that regulators are doing their job (see crisis, financial) belongs on that list, too, as does the reflexive deference to successful companies (see Enron, AIG).

Meanwhile, the auto beat has never really been a hotbed of watchdog journalism. Newspaper auto sections are mostly cash cows, often slapped together by the ad-sales side, with a syndicated column thrown in for good measure. Top trade publications, such as *Automotive News*, arguably should have been on top of the safety story, but even the venerable *Consumer Reports* was late on it. The magazine's January 2010 issue included an entire page praising the Toyota Avalon, with no mention of the acceleration problems. Even though *Consumer Reports* published a revealing online investigation on runaway Toyotas in December, it wasn't until the April auto issue that it disavowed its Toyota recommendations in print. "We wanted to be very cautious not to incite panic," says Jeff Bartlett, the magazine's online deputy auto editor, citing the rare one-in-10,000 incident rate that influenced the decision not to sound the alarm sooner.

Fair enough, but there's another lesson here, especially in this era of diminished newsroom resources: good journalism is often painstaking. Poring through years of safety complaints is tedious work. But look at the payoff. Thanks in part to two reporters' persistence, Toyota has recalled 10 million cars, worldwide. In April the automaker was hit with a \$16.4 million fine—the largest in NHTSA history.

Given the volume of coverage devoted to automobiles, it seems reasonable to expect more of a balance between exacting watchdog coverage and the kind of aspirational coverage that currently dominates. And so we award a **DART** to the automobile reporters—and their editors—on the frontlines of the Toyota story who had repeated opportunities to provide a real public service, but did not. **CJR**

Bite the Hand That Feeds

The Chicago News Cooperative and the tricky nonprofit terrain

SHIPWRECKED BY THE SEA CHANGE IN THEIR INDUSTRY, MANY JOURNALISTS are looking to philanthropy and academia as safe harbors. Numerous nonprofit ventures have been launched; others are on the drawing board. We are in the early stages of an era of experimentation, innovation, and cross-fertilization. The movement to nonprofit models has been so swift that we are only just beginning to wrestle with threshold questions about how such arrangements may affect the practice of journalism.

For the purposes of this essay, I will consider the Chicago News Cooperative, but the questions I raise apply to the entire emerging world of nonprofit journalism. The Chicago cooperative is largely staffed by former *Chicago Tribune* editors and reporters, and it received start-up funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Its board includes, among others, Newton Minow, a prominent lawyer and former chair of the Federal Communications Commission; Peter Osnos, founder and editor-at-large of PublicAffairs Books (and CJR's vice chairman); Martin Koldyke, businessman and former chair of WTTW public television; and Ann Marie Lipinski, vice president for civic engagement at the University of Chicago and a former editor of the *Tribune*.

Since mid-November 2009, the cooperative has contributed two pages of local content on Fridays and Sundays to the Chicago edition of *The New York Times*, with some of its articles running in the national edition. It plans to launch a revamped Web site and is expected to provide content to other outlets, such as WTTW.

With both the *Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* having made severe cutbacks, the cooperative assembled its own newsroom to cover the city and state. Putting aside the issue of whether this model is cost-effective and sustainable, a key question is: Will its funding design give rise to persistent inducements to self-censorship?

This question was brought to a point for me by a piece by James Warren in the January 10 edition of the *Times*. A former managing editor at the *Tribune*, Warren writes a column that appears twice a week. (Full disclosure: prior to his taking the Chicago News Cooperative column, Warren and I had several exploratory conversations about a possible collaborative journalistic venture.)

Against the background of Mayor Richard M. Daley's recent political woes—the lost Olympic bid, a deepening fiscal crisis—the theme of Warren's column was that the mayor and the city have something to be proud of: the University of Chicago.

Warren takes as his text a recent book by Jonathan Cole, the former provost of Columbia University. *The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence,*

Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected is an ode to America's research universities. In conversation with Warren, Cole singled out the U of C as "our closest approximation to the idea of a great university." Warren closes the column with the observation that "there is reason to be proud and protective" of the university.

From one perspective, this is an unexceptional column. From another, it's unsettling, when one considers that Ann Marie Lipinski, Warren's former editor and a board member of the news cooperative, is a vice president at the university. It's also worth noting that Cole's book was edited by another board member, Peter Osnos, and published by PublicAffairs, the publishing house he founded.

There is nothing improper about Warren's column. For sins in past lives, columnists are condemned to struggle every few days to be engaging and provocative. It's a difficult dance to do. In view of their unceasing hunger for ideas and material, it seems only fair to exempt them from various forms of conflict of interest. In any case, Warren subsequently appended to the column (on the *Times*'s Web site) an acknowledgment of Osnos's role as publisher of the Cole book, though not the nature of Lipinski's position at the university.

But the important question here is not the issue of transparency. Rather, the question is: In view of how the news



Big story The Cabrini-Green housing project is demolished as part of Chicago's controversial Plan for Transformation.

cooperative is constituted, will it bring sustained critical journalistic scrutiny to bear on the University of Chicago?

It may seem ungenerous of me to press this point, in view of the fact that Warren quotes Cole as saying that the Kalven Committee Report, drafted in 1967 by my late father, Harry Kalven Jr., a law professor at the U of C, is "the greatest expression of 'the sacred values' of a great university."

I am indeed grateful to Warren for retrieving this salute to my father. The two-page document that has come to be known as the Kalven Report is titled "Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action." Written at a time when students were demanding that universities take a stand on the Vietnam War and other issues, it addresses the question of when, if ever, it is appropriate for the institution to take public positions. While allowing for the possibility of exceptions, the report eloquently ar-

ticulates the principle that the university cannot take collective action on the issues of the day without endangering the conditions of freedom of inquiry and discussion that are its reason for existing.

For present purposes, what is striking is the sharp dichotomy between those core values and the way the institution conducts—and explains—itself when it acts as a corporate entity. Like other urban universities, it gets into disputes with the neighbors. Recent controversies have included stealth real-estate dealings by the university in a neighborhood west of campus, charges that its medical center systematically deflects the poor, and debate over its plan to destroy a large community garden in order to make temporary use of the site as a staging area for a construction project. (I have participated in the latter as both reporter and advocate.)

Such issues fall within the domain of Lipinski in her role as vice president

for civic engagement. The university describes her mission as "overseeing an effort to create a new model for an urban research institution acting in partnership with its city." In practice, Lipinski stands at the center of a formidable apparatus for managing public perceptions of the university in the service of its institutional agenda. Her office promotes university programs and, when controversies arise, is deployed to do damage control.

The issue here is not Lipinski. She is doing her job as defined by her employer. It is, rather, whether the news cooperative will be encumbered when a story about the university requires penetrating the official narrative promoted by the Office of Civic Engagement? Or to put the question another way, would the Chicago News Cooperation place on its board the chief of public relations for a major corporation or government agency it covers? How is this different?

Similarly, how will the cooperative cover its funders and philanthropy in general? The MacArthur Foundation is a major force in Chicago and beyond, yet it receives remarkably little sustained scrutiny from the press. Will it receive even less now that journalists are clamoring for its support? (More disclosure: MacArthur is also among the funders of this magazine.)

Beyond the question of how journalists will cover the foundations that fund them is a question of how they will report on public policy areas that those foundations have invested in. A case in point is the Chicago Housing Authority's "Plan for Transformation"—the demolition of high-rise public housing and its replacement (now largely stalled) with so-called new communities. Over the last decade, the MacArthur Foundation has strongly identified itself with these policy objectives. It describes its relationship with the city in this context as a "partnership." The embodiment of that partnership is Julia Stasch. As Mayor Daley's chief of staff, she was the architect of the city's plan for public housing. Then, in 2001, she joined the MacArthur Foundation as vice president for human and community development, where she has had a central role in making some \$65 million in grants related to public-housing "transformation."

In view of the news cooperative's dependence on MacArthur funding, will it investigate the realities on the ground for public-housing residents? If the facts so dictate, will it challenge the official narrative the city and foundation have worked so hard to construct? Is it prepared to risk damaging a key funding relationship in pursuit of an important story involving some of the city's poorest, most vulnerable residents?

Over the last ten years, the MacArthur Foundation has, in effect, policed the parameters of permissible discourse about public housing in Chicago. As the major funder in this area, it has provided support to virtually everyone working in the field (including, briefly, me). At a glance, one might imagine this reflects a commitment to robust debate. In fact, it more resembles a political machine that absorbs and thereby neutralizes potential challengers. For the most part, this

dynamic appears to be less the result of deliberate strategy than a byproduct of grantsmanship.

Imagine you are the executive director of a nonprofit working on public-housing issues. Support from the MacArthur Foundation accounts for a significant portion of your budget. You are disturbed by city policies that you believe harm public-housing tenants. MacArthur strongly supports those policies. Will you voice your concerns? Publicly? Privately? If so, how forcefully? You need to be realistic. You want to sustain the work of your organization, you have a payroll to meet, and you must answer to your board. The best course, you tell yourself, is to retreat to fight another day.

VIEWED IN ISOLATION, THIS MAY SEEM an exercise in common sense. Yet such decisions, in the aggregate, can have a devastating impact on public discourse about important issues. As journalists join the nonprofit world, will we be able to resist the siren song of such calculations? The danger is not so much that foundations will dictate what gets covered and what does not. That is relatively easy to resist. It is that we will seek to ingratiate ourselves to funders in order to stay afloat. It is precisely because the stakes are so high, with careers and enterprises in the balance, that the pull toward accommodation is so intense.

Self-censorship is subtle and insidious. It is often hidden from those practicing it as well as those subjected to it. Amid all the decisions that go into producing any journalistic artifact, it can easily be disguised as editorial judgment or realism about limited resources. After all, there are many worthy stories for the news cooperative to tackle that do not overlap with MacArthur's interests. When we back away from, or soften, a story that might alienate a funder, will we even recognize what we are doing?

In raising these questions, I do not mean to impugn the integrity of particular reporters and editors—or to claim some higher moral ground. In my career, I have accepted support from a number of funders with definite agendas. And I am currently seeking to raise funds for

the journalistic initiative with which I am associated, the Invisible Institute.

Nor do I mean to romanticize the old regime. In traditional newsrooms there are many pulls toward self-censorship: anxieties about alienating advertisers and subscribers; skittishness about proposing stories that challenge the crotchets of powerful editors and publishers; concern about maintaining access to institutions and individuals one covers; and so on.

This is familiar terrain. Good journalists navigate it with self-awareness, resourcefulness, and, when need be, cunning. The new kinds of potential conflicts in the emerging nonprofit journalism, by contrast, are largely uncharted. As we enter this gravitational field, the only way to keep our bearings is to challenge ourselves and one another to remain alert to the risks.

By the same token, philanthropy needs to examine its own practices. These days many foundations are disinclined to provide general operating support to their grantees. They prefer to fund specific projects bearing on the policy areas that concern them. That is the essence of their craft: to create incentives that draw work to a particular area. The danger in the journalistic context is that such incentives will also act as disincentives—as invitations to self-censorship.

Promises by foundations not to interfere and assertions of editorial independence by nonprofit ventures mean little. Only a strong sense of journalistic vocation can trump the otherwise compelling cost/benefit logic of grantsmanship. And the only meaningful expression of such clarity of purpose is the work itself. If we are prepared to err in the direction of biting the hand that feeds, perhaps journalism and philanthropy will co-evolve in ways that benefit both, yielding forms of patronage that effectively underwrite the First Amendment. Paradoxically, this is among the ways the conditions that imperil journalism also create an opportunity to recover its best traditions. **CJR**

JAMIE KALVEN is the editor of *A Worthy Tradition: Freedom of Speech in America* by Harry Kalven Jr., and the author of *Working With Available Light: A Family's World After Violence*. He has reported extensively on public housing and on police abuse in Chicago.

Embrace the Wonk

A new opportunity for reporters and political scientists

ON JANUARY 8, MARC AMBINDER, THE WIDELY-READ POLITICAL REPORTER AND blogger for *The Atlantic*, found a copy of *Game Change*, the gossipy insider's account of the 2008 presidential election by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, for sale days before its official release. Knowing a scoop when he saw one, Ambinder took to his blog to highlight some of the book's choicest tidbits. At the end of his first post, after excerpts about Harry Reid's "Negro dialect" comment and a secretive Clinton campaign "war room" to deal with questions about Bill's libido, Ambinder offered this apparent non sequitur:

Political scientists aren't going to like this book, because it portrays politics as it is actually lived by the candidates, their staff and the press, which is to say—a messy, sweaty, ugly, arduous competition between flawed human beings—a universe away from numbers and probabilities and theories.

It was a throwaway line. But to the small but growing contingent of poli-sci bloggers, the remark—coming from a journalist they respected and who had seemed, at times, to be interested in their work—it sounded like a challenge. A flurry of responses ensued, their tone captured in the title of a post on the group blog *The Monkey Cage*: "Is Marc Ambinder a Hater?"

As blog wars go, this was barely a skirmish. Ambinder made some conciliatory remarks on his Twitter feed and everybody moved on. Still, the episode offered a window into the complex relationship between political scientists and the political press—a relationship that, while marked by mutual wariness, holds great promise for a new breed of Washington journalist.

THE UNEASE WITH WHICH MUCH OF THE PRESS REGARDS THE ACADEMY HAS often been amplified when it comes to the study of American politics. In some journalistic complaints, the problem with political science is that it has gone astray. More than ten years ago, a long article by Jonathan Cohn for *The New Republic* faulted academics for abandoning the search for knowledge with real-world implications in favor of elegant but obscure models; the tagline asked, "When did political science forget about politics?" More frequently, the argument is a dispute about where political expertise comes from, with political scientists cast as ivory-tower elites to the shoe-leather-grinding reporter. Matt Bai, in a book review for the Spring 2009 issue of *Democracy*, put it more acerbically than Ambinder had. "My dinnertime conversation with three Iowans may not add up to a reliable portrait of the national consensus," Bai wrote, "but it's often more illuminating than

the dissertations of academics whose idea of seeing America is a trip to the local Bed, Bath & Beyond."

While Bai's tone verged on the scornful, most journalists aren't looking to start a fight with political science. But they're not often looking to it for inspiration, either. Diligent reporters may turn to political scientists for a useful primer on a new beat; lazy ones know how to use the field's "quote machines" to pad a story. But when it comes to daily coverage of the core subjects of political life—elections and campaigns, public opinion and voter behavior, legislative deal-making and money-grubbing—the relevance of a field in which an idea might gestate for two years before seeing print to a news cycle that turns over three times a day is not always obvious. As journalists go, Jeff Zeleny of *The New York Times* is hardly averse to political science—he studied it as an undergraduate, and can list the names of academics he's relied on. But for most of what he writes, he says, "The reality is, it's a newspaper story or a Web story. You can't go into abstract theories."

In recent years, though, there have been signs that views are shifting. In June 2007, Ezra Klein, then an associate editor for the liberal journal *The American Prospect*, put out a request for links to bloggers "who aggregate and keep track of political science research." The call yielded almost no response—evidence that, while economists had colonized the wonkier regions of the blogosphere in the same way they'd taken over many D.C. policy shops, political scientists had largely ceded the terrain. But Klein's item caught the eye of Henry Farrell, a professor of political science at George Washington University and a contributor to the early group blog *Crooked Timber*. The post, Farrell says, made it "very clear that there was a demand out there for political science"—and he encouraged his GW colleague John Sides, who'd been tinkering with the idea of a blog devoted to expanding the field's audience, to meet it.

In November 2007, *The Monkey Cage*—the name comes from an H.L. Mencken line about the nature of democracy—was launched. It had two central goals: to publicize political science research, and to provide commentary on current political events—a task, Sides

presciently acknowledged in a mission statement, that might involve "testing and perhaps contesting propositions from journalists or commentators."

The site quickly established credibility among political scientists. And it has attracted a respectable audience as a niche blog, drawing more than 30,000 unique visitors in peak months. But perhaps The Monkey Cage's greatest influence has been in fostering a nascent polisci blogosphere, and in making the field's insights accessible to a small but influential set of journalists and other commentators who have the inclination—and the opportunity—to approach politics from a different perspective.

That perspective differs from the standard journalistic point of view in emphasizing structural, rather than personality-based, explanations for political outcomes. The rise of partisan polarization in Congress is often explained, in the press, as a consequence of a decline in civility. But there are reasons for it—such as the increasing ideological coherence of the two parties, and procedural changes that create new incentives to band together—that have nothing to do with manners. Or consider the president. In press accounts, he comes across as alternately a tragic or a heroic figure, his stock fluctuating almost daily depending on his ability to "connect" with voters. But political-science research, while not questioning that a president's effectiveness matters, suggests that the occupant of the Oval Office is, in many ways, a prisoner of circumstance. His approval ratings—and re-election prospects—rise and fall with the economy. His agenda lives or dies on Capitol Hill. And his ability to move Congress, or the public, with a good speech or a savvy messaging strategy is, while not nonexistent, sharply constrained.

These powerful, simple explanations are often married to an almost monastic skepticism of narratives that can't be substantiated, or that are based in data—like voter's accounts of their own thinking about politics—that are unreliable. Think about that for a moment, and the challenge to journalists becomes obvious: If much of what's important about politics is either stable and predictable or unknowable, what's the value of the sort of news—a hyperactive chronicle

of the day's events, coupled with instant speculation about their meaning—that has become a staple of modern political reporting? Indeed, much of the media criticism on The Monkey Cage is directed at narratives that, from the perspective of political science, are either irrelevant or unverifiable. In the wake of the special election in Massachusetts,

Political science tends to emphasize structure over personalities.

Sides wrote numerous posts noting the weakness of the data about voter opinion there and faulting journalistic efforts to divine the meaning of Scott Brown's victory. "Yes, I know political science is a buzzkill," he wrote in one. "And no one gets paid to say 'We don't and can't know.' But that's what we should be saying." This is the sort of thing that John Balz—the son of veteran *Washington Post* political reporter Dan Balz, and a Ph.D. student in political science at the University of Chicago—might be referring to when he says the field produces what are, "from a journalistic perspective, unhelpful answers."

Unhelpful to journalism as it's traditionally done, at least. But for someone like Ezra Klein, who now fills a hybrid blogger/reporter/columnist role for the *Post* that didn't exist even five years ago, political science represents "the most significant untapped resource" for journalists. He and a group of bloggers, reporters, and opinion-shapers increasingly trade links not just with The Monkey Cage but with other poli-sci writers—one of whom, Jonathan Bernstein, landed a plum guest stint at Andrew Sullivan's The Daily Dish barely six months after he began blogging. A modest new feature at Salon, meanwhile, suggests another model for how to bring poli-sci insights to a broader audience. The Numerologist uses a chart or graph to make a point that pushes back against accepted political wisdom. (Sa-

lon's News Editor Steve Kornacki said he borrowed the idea from the sports page at *The Wall Street Journal*, which has been bringing the statistical revolution in sports analysis to a mass audience.)

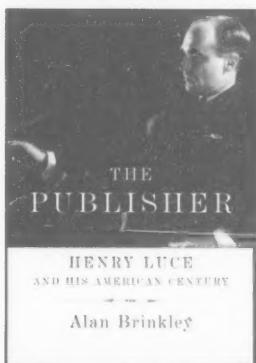
Beyond a generally center-left perspective, the journalists who have engaged most with political science—including Ambinder, who, six weeks after the *Game Change* flap, wrote a pair of posts building off evidence, highlighted by Sides, supporting the claim that most "independent" voters aren't really independent—have something in common: they're operating under a new model of what it means to be a political reporter, one that allows them to conceive of "news" in a different way. As Anne Kornblut, another *Post* political reporter, put it, "They're not aiming for A1 and being asked, 'What's new here? How is this going to change the country tomorrow?'" Klein is explicit on this point, outlining a role for journalists that sounds as much like teaching as reporting. "I think that we as a profession need to become more comfortable with repetition," he says. "What is newest is often not what is most helpful for readers." A case in point: when explaining why legislation is bottled up in Congress, Klein routinely discusses the skyrocketing use of Senate filibusters—a recent and consequential change in the rules of politics that nonetheless doesn't count as "news" on most days.

That's not to say that traditional reporting tasks will go by the wayside, nor should they. But even in day-to-day coverage, a poli-sci perspective can have value in helping reporters make choices about which storylines, and which nuggets of information, really matter. For that to happen, political scientists must do more to make their work accessible, reaching beyond the circle of journalists who are inclined to, as Sides says, "embrace the wonk."

Klein, for one, believes that as academics make more of an effort to put their insights before his colleagues, they'll find a receptive audience. His colleague Kornblut sounds ready to listen. "We're on the front lines every day," she says. "So help us." CJR

GREG MARX is an assistant editor at the Columbia Journalism Review.

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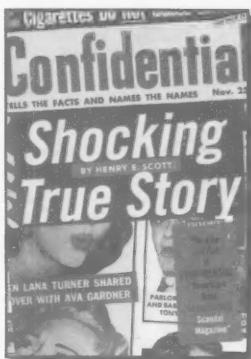


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A screenshot of the Columbia Journalism Review website. The header features a large white arrow pointing right on the left side. The URL 'http://cjr.org/' is in the address bar. The main navigation menu includes 'About Us', 'Contact', 'Advertise', 'Desks', 'Tuesday, April 20, 2010', 'Last Update: Tue 4:47 PM EST', 'Search', 'Cover Story', 'COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW', 'Strong Press, Strong Democracy', 'DESKS', 'Campaign Desk', 'Politics & Policy', 'Understanding the Unaffiliated', 'Bartlett on Shallow Think Tanks', 'The Audit', 'Business', 'Apple's Speech Policies Should', 'Bartlett on Shallow Think Tanks', 'The Observatory', 'Science', 'Will Collaborative Climate Cover', 'unknown', 'Mind Games Can neuroscience', 'Behind the News', 'The Media', 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...', 'Four awards', and 'The Kicker'. The footer includes a sidebar with 'COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW' and a small image of a fox.

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New Haven, CT
March 10, 2010



The New Investigators

*Nonprofits are breaking new ground.
Can they sustain themselves?*

BY JILL DREW

At a story meeting for California Watch, the nonprofit investigative news startup, employees sit around a conference table as Robert Salladay, the organization's senior editor, begins to describe the findings of a six-month investigation by one of his state capital reporters. "It gives me chills," Salladay tells the group. "Each paragraph could be its own story." Robert Rosenthal, the founder of California Watch, peers over his

glasses at an open laptop, then nods in agreement. "The reporting is so amazing," he says.

This is a sweet moment in any investigation, a charmed time that used to feel familiar in newsrooms, back when editors could afford to detach reporters for a few months of digging. Corey G. Johnson had used his shovel well. The California Watch reporter amassed twenty boxes of documents—so many that one government agency he's probing set up a private office for him to go through the material. Now Johnson was laying it all out for his editors, certain he had uncovered something important.

The editors agreed; this was big. But then the conversation veered in a direction unfamiliar to traditional newsrooms. Instead of planning how to get the story published before word of it leaked, the excited editors started throwing out ideas for how they could share Johnson's reporting with a large array of competitive news outlets across the state and

around the country. No one would get a scoop; rather, every outlet would run the story at around the same time, customized to resonate with its audience, be they newspaper subscribers, Web readers, television viewers, or radio listeners. California Watch's donors—at this point, a handful of high-powered foundations—expect it to publish high-impact investigative journalism about California as widely as possible.

"If we do six hundred schools [in a mapped database]... could we get KQED to come work with us?" Rosenthal asked.

"Maybe *The Sacramento Bee* or *The Orange County Register* could help with graphics," suggested Louis Freedberg, California Watch director.

"Could we ask Long Beach to do the history... pull some stories and photos from their files?" asked Rosenthal, adding that perhaps they should enlist a few college students to help with on-site interviews. PBS was interested in the story, as were each of the television networks, Rosenthal said, ticking off a list of colleagues he'd already contacted to share the story's gist.

"Okay. There are a lot of balls in the air here," warned Mark Katches, California Watch's editorial director. "How are we going to keep track of all this?"

California Watch is one piece of what Charles Lewis, the well-known founder of the Center for Public Integrity, calls "an emerging ecosystem of investigative reporting." Nonprofit investigative news centers aren't new; Lewis founded the Center for Public Integrity back in 1989. The Center for Investigative Reporting

was launched even earlier, in 1977; it is the parent of California Watch and shares its offices in Berkeley. Rosenthal is CIR's executive director and has overall responsibility for both it and California Watch.

What is new is that nonprofit centers have moved from the margins into a core role in investigative news production. This trend has been under way since 2007, when Paul Steiger, the former *Wall Street Journal* managing editor, announced that a foundation established by Herbert and Marion Sandler, the California thrift magnates, had given him a \$10-million-a-year grant to fund what has become ProPublica. In April, the announcement of ProPublica's first Pulitzer prize helped solidify the sense that the investigative world is changing.

Some predict that commercial media will largely abandon high-cost investigations. "When I look at the next ten years, investigative reporting is going to die in corporate settings," said Nick Penniman, executive director and co-founder of

the Huffington Post Investigative Fund. "Nonprofits are the only place this reporting will survive and thrive over the long haul." In a broad, social sense, he acknowledges that people do see the intrinsic value of a newspaper as its watchdog function. But the sad truth is, he continues, "it's very difficult from a profit perspective to see the value of sinking millions into investigative reporting."

Others, like Marc Duvoisin, deputy managing editor for projects at the *Los Angeles Times*, disagree. "I don't know where it will settle out," he said, allowing that perhaps as many as 40 percent of the investigations done in U.S. media could eventually be donor-funded. But—assuming revenue stabilizes (admittedly a large assumption)—he expects at least 60 percent of investigative work will continue to be done by mainstream media organizations.

Duvoisin thinks it's great that philanthropies are stepping up in this emergency situation, as commercial media owners scramble to fix a broken business model during a prolonged economic slump. He compares investigative reporting to opera, which was popular entertainment, enjoyed and supported by the masses, in the nineteenth century. Today, it needs wealthy patrons to survive; hence, he said, "Mobil Oil ads in your opera program." But that is not the path he believes investigative reporting will follow in the end, or should: "I'd hate to see this work given over entirely to nonprofits."

Most everyone agrees that it's still early in the nonprofit investigative news experiment, and hard to know what will eventually happen. Many use the "Wild West" cliché to describe the environment. Numerous centers of various size and scope are up and running and publishing their work, writing their rules as they go and attempting to engage new readers through social networking and other methods enabled by the Internet. Several others are teed up, trying to raise enough money to launch. Their hurried steps and missteps will determine whether the nonprofit model develops and endures or returns to its previous perch on the margin.

The overwhelming question faced by each organization is how to build multiple, stable sources of funding while maintaining journalistic integrity. It's way too soon to know what those answers will be, except to say that there likely will not be a one-size-fits-all solution.

Lewis, in the hunt with the rest of them, has established his fourth nonprofit journalism venture, the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University. And while he and others are figuring out how to sustain their operations, serious journalism is being committed in new and interesting ways at new and interesting places.

Despite drastic cuts in newsroom budgets over the past decade, it seems that investigative journalists are persistent sorts, hard to kill off. They continue to push for ways to do their work, even if it means founding new organizations to support them. "I do have a need to investigate the bastards," Lewis said, smiling.

THE NEW CALIFORNIA WATCH OFFICE, JUST DOWN THE street from the University of California, Berkeley campus, has the feel of so many similar offices set up at the beginning

of the dot-com boom some fifteen years ago. It's quirky and modern. The reporters work in an open space in a loft area at the back of the long, narrow, four-story storefront building, while Katches and Freedberg occupy the only two offices at the top of a landing. Others, including Rosenthal, sit below on the first floor in tiny, glass-walled cubicles. A few empty desks await new arrivals, but it already feels packed in.

The creative tension and excitement at today's California Watch echoes, say, Yahoo! in 1995. Today's sketchy plans for "multiple streams of revenue" at nonprofits sound a bit like the hazy hopes for "paths to profitability" at the dot-coms.

But there are distinct differences, too. Dot-coms blew up by the thousands, chasing "buzz" and "eyeballs," squandering millions to get both, but without a clear business model. Today's nonprofits can only hope to get their next round of donor cash if they produce something tangible—stories that create a buzz and, ideally, change something. So they prize "collaboration" and "transparency" and plow whatever money they can raise into substantive journalism. "My goal is to support and pay journalists to do high-quality work, not to earn twenty-two to twenty-five-percent margins," Rosenthal said.

There is also a difference in scale. The money flowing into nonprofit journalism is a pittance compared to the venture-backed billions of the '90s. It's also a pittance compared to what's been cut from traditional newsrooms.

Rick Edmonds, media-business analyst at the Poynter Institute, figures the newspaper industry has cut \$1.6 billion in annual reporting and editing capacity since 2005, or roughly 30 percent. It is unclear how much of that hit investigative journalism—"We've tried to slice it a couple of ways, but it's a very hard number to get," said Mark Horvit, executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE). But, he said, there's no question that investigative and enterprise reporting, especially in state capitals, has been slashed.

In any event, philanthropies have begun opening their wallets. According to a running tally kept by the J-Lab at American University, about \$143 million of foundation money has flowed into news media enterprises between 2005 and April 2010. More than half of that has gone to twelve investigation-oriented news organizations, according to a tally by CJR.

That is not enough to replace what has been lost, of course. "National funders are not going to fund all of us," said Maggie Mulvihill, co-founder of the New England Center for Investigative Reporting at Boston University. "They want to see us collaborate. We have to help each other."

The imperative to collaborate has given rise to the new buzzword for this era: partnership. These investigative nonprofits all talk about their distribution "partners," (i.e. newspapers, television news programs, Web sites, and radio broadcasters who run their work); their reporting "partners," (i.e., traditional media reporters who team with the nonprofits, or university students who work with a nonprofit's professional journalists, or groups of nonprofits who combine their efforts to nail a story); their user "partners," (i.e., those who respond to crowd-sourcing queries or donate a few bucks via Kachingle or agree to pay for a membership or join a Facebook fan page or even those who simply post a comment on a story).

Nonprofit Investigative Centers

Several sites are working to take up some of the slack caused by massive layoffs at the nation's newspapers.

	First Story Published	2010 Budget	Full-Time Staff / Others ¹	Founders and Past Affiliation
National				
ProPublica propublica.org	June 2008	\$10 mil	37 / 7	Paul Steiger, <i>Wall Street Journal</i>
Center for Public Integrity publicintegrity.org	December 1990	4-5 mil	11 / 12	Charles Lewis, <i>60 Minutes</i> (Bill Buzenberg, current director)
Center for Investigative Reporting centerforinvestigativereporting.org	January 1977	3.8 mil	9 / 10	Dan Noyes, journalism nonprofit David Weir & Lowell Bergman, <i>Rolling Stone</i> (Robert Rosenthal, current director)
Frontline / WGBH pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline	1983	-2 mil	29 / 24	David Fanning, <i>WGBH</i>
Huffington Post Investigative Fund huffpostfund.org	June 2009	-2 mil	10 / 5	Arianna Huffington, <i>Huffington Post</i> Nick Penniman, <i>American News Project</i>
Regional				
California Watch (A Project of the Center for Investigative Reporting) californiawatch.org	September 2009	2.1 mil	11 / 8	Robert Rosenthal, <i>CIR</i> director
Fair Warning fairwarning.org	March 2010	-250 K	2 / 4	Myron Levin, <i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Investigate West inww.org	January 2010	225 K	3 / 6	Rita Hibbard, <i>Seattle Post-Intelligencer</i>
I-News: Rocky Mountain Investigative News Network inewsnetwork.org	February 2010	180 K ³	1 / 13	Laura Frank, <i>Rocky Mountain News</i>
Maine Center for Public Interest Reporting pinetreewatchdog.org	January 2010	160 K	2 / 1	John Christie, <i>Central Maine Newspapers</i> Naomi Schalit, <i>Kennebec Journal & Morning Sentinel</i>
University-Affiliated				
Investigative Reporting Workshop (American U.) investigativeworkshop.org	March 2009	-1.5 mil	11 / 10	Wendell Cochran, <i>American University</i> Charles Lewis, <i>Center for Public Integrity</i>
New England Center for Investigative Reporting (Boston U.) necir-bu.org/wp	August 2009	849 K ⁴	2 / 8	Joe Bergantino, <i>WBZ-TV</i> Maggie Mulvihill, <i>WBZ-TV</i>
Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism (Brandeis U.) brandeis.edu/investigate	September 2004	-550 K	4 / 30	Florence Graves, <i>Common Cause</i>
The Watchdog Institute (San Diego State U.)² watchdoginstitute.org	October 2009	400 K	4 / 0	Lorie Hearn, <i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>
Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (Univ. of Wisc.)² wisconsinwatch.org	July 2009	240 K	2 / 8	Andy Hall, <i>Wisconsin State Journal</i>

1. Others include: part-time, interns, freelance, fellows, contract workers, volunteers.

2. Has individual 501(c)3 status.

3. Includes approx. \$75,000 (42%) in-kind contributions.

4. Includes approx. \$506,000 (60%) in-kind contributions.

Although many additional nonprofit news sites are also forming, some of them collaborating with powerhouses like National Public Radio, their missions are more broad than investigations. They are not listed on this chart, which focuses on a sampling of nonprofit sites that disclose their donors, employ full-time journalists who do more than teach, and provide original investigative reporting directly to the public.

Some even call their donors their "partners," though others are wary of that because they fear their work being seen as supporting a donor's cause.

The Center for Public Integrity has long partnered with commercial and nonprofit media on investigations, but its collaborations today "are at a new level than what we had seen," said Bill Buzenberg, the center's executive director. "It's new. It's different. It's exciting. It's a lot of work."

MARK KATCHES WAS VERY BUSY. ON HIS SCREEN WAS A 147-inch story that he was cutting to a six-inch box that *The Fresno Bee* had agreed to run, though the *Bee* would refer readers to the California Watch Web site to see a full multimedia package. The stories were based on a four-month investigation by reporter Erica Perez about public university buildings in California that are judged to be dangerous to occupy in an earthquake. Next up was re-editing the story to a fifty-inch version to send over for a look-see to *The Orange County Register*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sacramento Bee*, the *Torrance Daily Breeze*, and others. Nearly all the papers wanted a few graphs up high about the campus buildings in their circulation areas, and Katches knew from previous collaborations that a few editors would have good suggestions for tweaking the lede or tightening the nut graph. It's not edit-by-committee, he said; it's more like "a collective brain."

Each nonprofit in this new ecosystem operates a little differently when it comes to distributing its stories, although all are hoping for the biggest possible impact. ProPublica offers its work for free, and often partners a reporter from its staff with one at a major news outlet. The two co-publish the exclusive work and then others are free to re-publish, with credit. "We've published about 225 stories with nearly 50 different partners over the last 21 months," Steiger wrote in an e-mail. "Many of these have been bilateral partnerships, but some have been much more complex." He cited ProPublica's stories on police violence in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as one example. "We've worked first with *The Nation* magazine, and more recently (and simultaneously) with *The Times-Picayune* and *Frontline*."

The HuffPo Investigative Fund generally works alone and then sends alerts out when a new piece is published on its Web site. Media organizations are encouraged to re-publish the Fund's stories for free, with a refer to the Fund's Web site. The Fund's for-profit sister, The Huffington Post, often does; other news organizations, less so. Although he has not asked anyone specifically about the lack of substantial pickup, The Fund's Penniman said he suspects the reason is an "aversion to work with what's perceived as a competitive brand."

Some media critics have questioned whether the HuffPo Investigative Fund should qualify for nonprofit status at all, because they perceive it as feeding the for-profit Huffington Post. Penniman rejected the criticism and stressed that The Huffington Post is treated like other major news outlets when he sends out feelers to see if an organization is interested in publishing an upcoming investigation. All of the Fund's work is published open-source, and it collaborates with others

to provide work for the public benefit. "It would be really hard to argue that we have not fulfilled the requirements for nonprofit status," Penniman said, though he allows that the brand connection with The Huffington Post "is strategically advantageous for us."

When The Huffington Post picks up a Fund story, it does get read. One of its first stories in a series about insurance-claims denials featured a rape victim whose mental-health expenses were rejected for reimbursement. "We did that story in multimedia. The woman looked right into the camera and told her story. It was so powerful," Penniman said, noting that several bloggers jumped on the story, followed by a few television journalists. Then several female members of Congress drafted legislation to deal with the issue. "It was instant impact," Penniman said. "I was so gratified to see that as a journalist."

Most new nonprofits have to work hard for that kind of reach. The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, launched in January 2009 by Andy Hall, a veteran investigative reporter who had just left his job at the *Wisconsin State Journal*, generally e-mails editors and news directors around the state offering a story for publication, usually targeted to the upcoming Sunday editions. Those who are interested can download embargoed versions of the story, at full and condensed lengths. Local editors can add their own staff reporting to the stories and are not required to run the story on a specific day. Indeed, Hall said sometimes a newspaper or television station will run a story a week or two after it's been released for general use and has been posted to the center's Web site, Wisconsinwatch.org. Many other centers—including California Watch—attempt to fix a specific publication date, to give the story the biggest possible bang.

California Watch generally charges for its stories, although the amount slides from around \$75 to \$500, Rosenthal said, based on the size of the news outlet. The fee can be reduced if the publisher agrees to barter services, like taking photos or designing graphics that can be used by others that are publishing the story. *La Opinión*, for example, often gets its California Watch stories for free because it agrees to translate the pieces into Spanish for free; California Watch then redistributes the stories to other Spanish-language media.

Having worked for hours to tweak and insert and trim different versions of the same story for various partner papers, Katches vows that "these are introductory rates." Rosenthal said he knows some editors who are willing to pay more. "I'm comfortable seeing what the market will bear, based on the quality of our stories," he said.

Rosenthal said he initially hoped to build a destination Web site for California Watch's journalism, but that's no longer the main focus. This is a new media/old media collaboration: the first seven stories California Watch delivered this calendar year were published in newspapers with a combined circulation of 6.8 million, Rosenthal said, a huge reach that no start-up Web site could muster. He hasn't had time to calculate the additional number of listeners and viewers reached by the radio and television stations that have run those stories.

That's not to say that growing CaliforniaWatch.org is not a high priority. Each reporter is expected to help keep the

site current by posting a blog item daily. Deadline is 10 p.m. A copy editing intern works until midnight on the files, which are posted before 1 a.m. so that an influential state politics blog, Rough & Tumble by Jack Kavanagh, can decide whether to link to any of them in his morning's suggested reads.

Katches also wants reporters to be as open as possible about their work. Each story they write is displayed on the site in a frame that links to their photo, bio, a general description of what they're working on next, what they're reading, and their latest tweets.

All this transparency was new to Lance Williams, a veteran investigative reporter who helped break many exclusive stories on the BALCO steroids-in-baseball scandal, along with reporter Mark Fainaru-Wada, when they were at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Williams is now California Watch's senior reporter. He admits being a bit baffled about Twitter at first, but then he realized that penning short bursts wasn't that different from his days on a newspaper rewrite desk. "You don't have to always do newspaper-style narratives,"

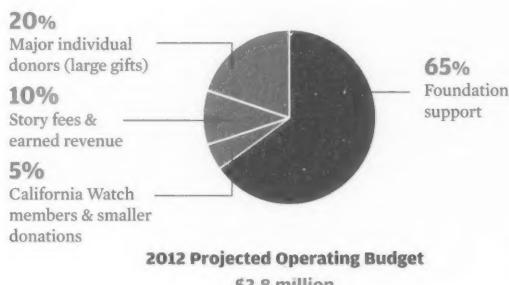
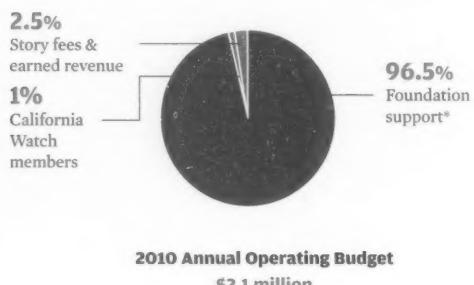
who also served as chairman of the group's steering committee, hosted weekly conference calls among the twenty or so member nonprofit journalism groups as they tried to find a pilot project they could truly collaborate on—a sort of "proof-of-concept" story to show donors that investigative journalists really can work together and deliver a story of major impact across the country.

Lombardi's story made sense for the pilot. Many of the new nonprofit centers were housed at universities, so the reporting could resonate and influence those most directly affected by the issue. She had developed several good data sets that could be broken out for individual universities, including one of schools that participated in a federal grant program to reduce campus assaults. Lombardi said she didn't feel territorial about her work. "I thought, 'if only we had a giant team, we could create a huge ripple effect....A lot could be uncovered with on-the-ground reporting.'"

Lombardi and her editors got five regional nonprofit news organizations as well as National Public Radio to sign onto

Building Sustainable Revenue Streams

California Watch hopes to reduce its dependence on philanthropy



* California Watch is a unit of the larger Center for Investigative Reporting. California Watch's funders are currently the James Irvine Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the California Endowment.

Williams said, to communicate what's important or interesting news: "A good tweet is like a good lead."

KRISTEN LOMBARDI, A STAFF WRITER FOR THE CENTER FOR Public Integrity in Washington, was the linchpin to what is perhaps the most ambitious multi-organization reporting project to date. She had worked for a year on a series about sexual assaults on college campuses that often go unpunished. Last fall, as the Center planned to release the first round of stories detailing the results of her investigation, her editors suggested she collaborate on a second round of stories with an emerging organization, the Investigative News Network.

That fledgling group (see "Great Expectations," CJR, September/October 2009) was forming under the direction of Buzenberg, Lewis, Rosenthal, and Brant Houston, the long-time executive director of IRE, who now holds the Knight Chair in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Houston,

the project, a feat made easier when the Center for Public Integrity secured a \$40,000 grant from the McCormick Foundation to fund the collaboration. Her first wave of stories ran in December and the second set was planned for February. As she was in final edits on her first piece, she began working closely with reporters in Boston, Denver, Houston, Madison, Wisconsin, and Seattle as they scoured their campuses for information about what was happening in their regions. "I'm not going to lie. It was very hard to do," Lombardi said.

At the Wisconsin Center, Hall agreed. The Center was one of the collaborators, and "I stayed up thirty-three straight hours at the end of the project," he said. Not only was he overseeing the biggest project his center had undertaken during those hours. He was also meeting a deadline to finish a fundraising and sustainability plan for his center, discussing several upcoming stories with radio and television partners, and speaking to a reporting class about another project planned for this spring. "I'm also trying to run a startup news organization," he said.

Hall was pleased when the University of Wisconsin responded to the report by pledging to review its policies and having its dean of students post an open letter underscoring that sexual-assault allegations will be taken seriously by school administrators. Other Investigative News Network collaborators also said the package hit the mark.

At the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, officials set up a commission to review their policies after the New England Center for Investigative Reporting led its story with a student who, after confessing to having raped a friend on campus, had been allowed to remain enrolled and escape significant discipline. Collaboration can get complicated, however. Despite its solid reporting, the story attracted some controversy because the version that ran on the front page of *The Boston Globe* omitted a sentence that was in other versions noting why Boston University, which houses the Center, was not included in the report.

When Maggie Mulvihill and Joe Bergantino, the associate director and director of the center, exchanged e-mails with a reporter from the *Boston Phoenix* who questioned the omission, the reporter wrote a story saying they had threatened him with libel, quoting a statement that read, in part, "An article that depicted our center as deliberately leaving BU out of the sexual-assault story so as to either protect the university or act as its public-relations agent would be totally inaccurate, defamatory, and display a reckless disregard of the truth." Mulvihill and Bergantino told the reporter in an e-mail that their statement wasn't a threat, but was just stating the truth. Bergantino said later that it would not make sense to try to sue the *Phoenix*, since the paper's parent company also owns one of the center's publishing partners.

The incident prompted *Globe* editor Martin Baron to publicly disassociate the paper from any libel threat. But he said the *Globe* will continue to work with the Center, calling it an "evolving relationship." "I've made clear publicly that we are not a part of that incident," Baron said. "People do things we don't approve of all the time, sometimes on our own staff. No one incident would cause us to disassociate from someone." Baron said the two organizations are working through structural questions about how stories are handled. For example, Baron signaled that he doesn't much like being forced to run a story on a particular day because other publishing partners are doing so. "We like to work on our own schedule," he said.

Other sites have had hiccups, but so far, big blowups have been avoided, despite the speed and multi-tentacled process by which sensitive stories are being handled. For instance, no one has yet suggested that any site secretly takes money to promote a funders' political or policy agenda, something some investigative journalists worry could happen in the philanthropic model. The Investigative News Network, in fact, specifically excludes members that don't publicly disclose all donors on their Web sites.

How far the influence of donors and their causes will creep into stories is being watched closely. "For investigative startups that depend on benefactors, it certainly is possible to see a time when the interests of the benefactors come into conflict with the inquiries of the journalists," said Duvoisin of the *Los Angeles Times*. "I'm confident the editors at these organiza-

tions can manage potential conflicts, but it may take vigilance over time as this plays out. One shouldn't assume nonprofit equals independent. It's much the same battle journalists have fought for years to preserve their independence."

Jeff Leen, who heads the investigative team at *The Washington Post*, is not worried that donor influence will produce slanted reporting or unjustified conclusions, because investigative projects get such scrutiny. "The hardest thing is to get your investigation noticed," Leen said. "To do that, you have to have the goods." No amount of hype or slick presentation can cover over thin investigative reporting, he said. "If it's not any good, the whole project just drops down a deep well."

Leen compared the path of investigative reporting to that of Hollywood. In the old days, studios controlled the process: they employed the writers, the actors, the producers, the designers. Today, studios produce some of their own films, but there's also a thriving pool of independent producers who pitch their ideas to the studios. "You have to make a lot of movies to get a few good ones," Leen said, adding that he welcomes both the competition and the collaboration with these new independent investigators.

Besides, Leen added, the nonprofits are employing many friends and journalists he deeply admires, who were forced to leave their newspaper jobs.

Can it last? At California Watch, Freedberg believes that his group is creating something that will endure beyond a few funding cycles. "We're on this innovation curve, going in an upward direction, as opposed to a survival curve," he said. But they're taking nothing for granted. When editors realized too late that their big story on university building safety was going to run during spring break, they turned to a time-honored tradition to get the news out: as the U.C. Berkeley students streamed back the following week, Katches and other California Watch staffers stood outside their office near campus and distributed fliers advertising the story. "It's all about getting stories into the hands of people who are impacted by our journalism the most—one at a time, if need be," Katches wrote in a blog item.

Indeed, the need to investigate the bastards runs deep. Rosenthal describes how he was hooked. Stuffed between his desk and a glass wall in his cluttered California Watch office is a heavy-paper mat, made with the impression from the printing-press plate of the front page of the June 13, 1971 edition of *The New York Times*. The lead story: the Pentagon Papers, a piece drawn from the secret history of the war in Vietnam as compiled by the U.S. Department of Defense. In one of his first assignments as a *Times* copy boy that year, Rosenthal was assigned to the secret Hilton Hotel team that was combing through the documents, looking for sections to describe and publish. He slept in the room with two filing cabinets that held the Pentagon Papers, and got to Xerox several parts of them. The reporters and editors, he said, accepted him as part of the team.

So began a glorious adventure into investigative reporting of the highest caliber. And it ain't over yet. **CJR**

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Can Local Television Afford Investigations?

A Texas station makes the calculation

BY LISA ANDERSON

In the predawn hours of October 16, 2006, the home of Benny and Martha Cryer exploded. They had lived in the house, in Wylie, Texas, northeast of Dallas, for fifty-two years, but as frantic neighbors helplessly watched, the elderly couple was burned under flaming debris. Both died. ¶ Five months later the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the oil and gas business in the state, filed a report that speculated that utility workers digging near

the Cryer house might have loosened an underground compression coupling connecting natural-gas lines, allowing leaking gas to build to dangerous levels. It found the gas company, Atmos Energy, blameless and praised its cooperation.

But in the days after the explosion, WFAA-TV in Dallas began its own detailed investigation. It reached a very different conclusion, as we'll see.

That WFAA has an investigative unit—one that continues to follow the ramifications of the gas-explosion story in 2010—is something of an anomaly in local television these days. In-depth investigative reporting is under siege on every platform in journalism and particularly in local television, where the majority of Americans still get their daily news. Such reporting is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive, not to mention potential fodder for lawsuits. It is also indispensable to a democratic society, shining a bright light on issues, injustices, and problems that otherwise remain hidden from public view.

Still, it is difficult to measure the return on investment from investigative reporting in dollars or ratings. As audiences and revenues continue to decline in an increasingly fragmented news landscape, even stations committed to quality investigative work must continually ask: Can we still afford it? Here's how one station makes that calculation.

IN A GLASSY, LOW-SLUNG BUILDING IN downtown Dallas, WFAA-TV sits alongside *The Dallas Morning News* and just a few blocks from the infamous former Texas School Book Depository where, from a sixth floor window, Lee Harvey Oswald fired the shots that killed President John F. Kennedy in 1963. In fact, barely two hours after the assassination, WFAA had the first live interview with Abraham Zapruder, the man who made a home movie of the assault on the presidential motorcade as it passed through Dealey Plaza.

Nearly a half-century later, WFAA-TV, the flagship of Dallas-based Belo Corporation's twenty local stations, has made a name for itself as a place that believes in investigative journalism and finds a way to support it.

That's a hard and deliberate decision in an industry that has seen viewership and revenues steadily decline over the last decade, as cable and the Internet have siphoned off audience and advertising. "I know viewership is down," says Michael Valentine, vice president of news at the station.

"There are many more choices, and it becomes incumbent on us to provide unique and compelling content. The investigative unit is certainly part of that."

Although its revenue losses are not as steep as some of its competitors, Belo, whose stations generally are market leaders, is hardly immune. It reported that its total revenue in the fourth quarter of 2009 declined 13.8 percent from the same quarter a year earlier, and total company revenues for 2009 were down 19.5 percent against 2008.

After cresting at about \$22 billion in 2006, revenue for all local U.S. TV stations, including network affiliates and independents, dropped to \$20.6 billion in 2008 and was projected to decline 22 percent more—to \$16 billion—in 2009. Still, while it may no longer boast the dizzying 50 percent-plus profit margins it enjoyed until about two decades ago, local television—with news broadcasts driving about 44 percent of its revenues—generally is still profitable. Profit margins range from single digits for struggling stations to between

30 and 40 percent for top performers in large markets. The industry has made hard trims recently to insure it stays profitable, shedding about 1,600 jobs in the last two years, out of roughly 30,000.

When personnel cuts come around, investigative teams often are among the first casualties. Their reporters tend to be some of the newsroom's most experienced and highly paid, and in some cases the unit is assigned a dedicated producer and photographer. That adds up to the kind of money that many cash-strapped stations well might decide to save or reallocate—no matter how prestigious the unit.

That's what happened in January 2009 when Roberta Baskin, the last remaining member of the investigative unit at Allbritton Communications' WJLA-TV in Washington, D.C., was laid off—the day after she won a duPont-Columbia Award for exposing a pediatric dental chain that was ripping off Medicaid and other insurers by doing unnecessary procedures on children. The station said steep personnel cutbacks had left it unable to afford specialty reporting.

Joe Bergantino, an award-winning veteran of Boston's WBZ-TV and head of its investigative unit, said he left in May 2008 after he was told the station had decided to look at "less in-depth projects." He became the first director and senior investigative reporter at Boston University's New England Center for Investigative Reporting.

In Dallas, the ranks of investigative reporters also have thinned, the latest departure being that of Bennett Cunningham from CBS affiliate KTVT last December, reportedly over a management request that he take a five-figure pay cut. He plans to practice law.

WFAA HAS ITS OWN STABLE OF ACCOMPLISHED INVESTIGATIVE journalists, including the award-winning News8 Investigates team of reporters Byron Harris and Brett Shipp, producer Mark Smith, and photojournalist Billy Bryant. The station is hardly impervious to the economic pressures weighing on so many stations these days, but WFAA's management has decided to allocate resources in a way that retains and highlights strong investigative work, and not just during sweeps periods, when ratings are measured, but on a near-daily basis.

Harris, Shipp, and Smith brought home a 2009 duPont-Columbia Gold Baton for a trio of investigations—the first time the award's highest honor has ever gone to a local television station. That baton gleams on a sunny windowsill in Valentine's office. He commissioned the investigation into the tragic Wylie house explosion, back in 2006, when he was the station's executive news director. That story led to a series called "The Buried and The Dead," one in the package of three investigative series that snagged the award. More importantly, it exposed a potentially deadly threat to thousands of Texas families.

After months spent reviewing reams of documents, interviewing families, and enlisting the help of experts, reporter Shipp and producer Smith discovered that the problem with the gas-pipe coupling near the home of Benny and Martha Cryer was not just an aberration caused by work in the vicin-

ity by another utility, as the official report suggested. Instead, it was symptomatic of a far larger problem, one plaguing thousands of similar couplings and posing the threat of more tragic results.

Mostly installed prior to the 1980s, these compression couplings—connecting the gas main to the service line to the home gas meter—were joined with rubber seals that appeared to steadily deteriorate and weaken over years of cyclical, weather-related expansion and contraction of the soil. Shipp found that the manufacturer of the couplings had long ago warned of their "pullout potential" and had recommended the addition of a cheap part to secure the connection. Called a supplemental restraint, the part would have kept the joints together. But the gas company apparently failed to make the modification.

Moreover, the investigation revealed that the Railroad Commission members, who are elected, received a substantial amount of their campaign funds from the very industries they regulated—which may raise questions but is legal under Texas law.

The WFAA series launched a year after the Cryer house exploded. "And three weeks later the Railroad Commission ordered the removal of the problem couplings that resulted in the Cryers' deaths," said Shipp. It is likely that the series and the station's relentless pursuit of the story saved lives. But, Shipp pointed out, some three million compression couplers still exist beneath the soil across Texas and are being replaced only after leaks are reported or found.

Since the Cryer house blew up in 2006, at least five more houses have exploded, killing two Texans and seriously injuring at least five others. At least four of those explosions were related to faulty compression couplings, according to Shipp. "That story never went away. We could have said we won our award and that's it. Uh-uh. People are still dying," said Shipp. He is fifty-one, a tall, lanky reporter and second-generation WFAA-TV staffer whose affable demeanor belies a fierce persistence. He talks Texas, too. "All our stories have legs," he said. "It just depends if you want to keep walking."

THE WFAA INVESTIGATIVE UNIT SCORED ITS FIRST BIG triumph with the sixteen-part series "Fake Drugs, Real Lives," which won a 2002 Peabody and a 2003 duPont-Columbia Silver Baton. Shipp and Smith reported that the Dallas Police Department's spectacular success on drug busts in 2001 was not quite what it seemed. In fact, more than half the total cocaine recovered, and more than a quarter of the methamphetamines, turned out to be nothing more than pulverized billiard chalk or sheetrock. Paid police informants framed dozens of people—primarily non-English-speaking Mexican immigrants, many of them working as mechanics—by stashing the fake drugs in cars at auto shops. The informants collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in rewards, which they shared with their police handlers.

As a result of the News8 investigation into the planting of fake drugs, about two dozen innocent people had drug charges against them dropped. The police officer at the cen-

ter of the investigation was prosecuted, convicted, and sent to prison. Three other officers were prosecuted and sentenced to probation. For News8, said Smith, "it built a following, it built a viewing audience of people that really wanted to see more." It also helped further build up investigative reporting as a distinctive signature of the WFAA "brand."

Harris and Smith jumped in a car and drove 1,500 miles in four days, unearthing a swindle that stretched coast to coast.

That is something Mike Devlin, WFAA president and general manager, considers good business. "The war we're in is against parity. There is a sameness in newspapers. There is a sameness in television. The average viewer says this is all the same," said Devlin. "Aside from outlandish personalities—and they come and go—strong investigative reporting is one of the key components in fighting this issue of parity, or the homogenization of the industry."

Shipp and Harris usually follow up on their stories as they develop. That puts them more frequently on the air and also reinforces WFAA's reputation for investigations. The unit has a lot of latitude on stories—which range from fraudulent autopsy mills and unqualified airline mechanics to pastors using church jets for personal business and local voter fraud. Their story ideas are not always approved, says Harris, a thirty-five-year veteran of WFAA. "I describe us as Labradors. The Labrador is supposed to go get the duck and come back with it. That's what I do. Sometimes the hunters"—the managers—"say, 'we don't like the story—go get another duck.'" He does so, he says, because "they've got the rifle."

Harris is sixty-three, a silver-haired, natty dresser with the manner of a slightly prickly professor. He seems to have a particular nose for financial wrongdoing—and is proud of WFAA for allowing him to cover those stories. "God, how many local TV stations do stories about the Export-Import Bank?" he asks.

The very thought of a complex financial investigation would likely induce yawns at many stations. But Harris and Smith pulled off a series about the taxpayer-funded bank called "Money for Nothing," the second of the three series that earned WFAA the 2009 duPont gold baton. It took a year of hard digging. "We waited eight months just to get the documents to do the story," says producer Smith. He is fifty-four, a former investigative journalist at the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* who came to the station in late 2000. An intense, energetic man, Smith gets

many of the tips and does much of the groundwork for the dozen or more short, medium, and long-range stories the team may be juggling at any one time.

In an effort to boost U.S. exports, the Washington, D.C.-based Export-Import Bank lends about \$12 billion a year to foreign firms seeking to buy American products. The problem, Harris and Smith discovered, was that the bank did little due diligence. Hundreds of millions of dollars in loans were going to nonexistent companies in Mexico—thus the Texas angle—to pay for nonexistent American goods. Much of the money was pocketed by phony "exporters" who fabricated borrowers and suppliers through false applications and fake invoices. When the loans defaulted, the taxpayers picked up the tab—an estimated \$243 million between 2003 and 2007 alone.

The bank refused to speak to Harris, but after an eight-month delay, loan documents acquired under the Freedom of Information Act finally arrived. Though sparse, they told a story. Shortly after they got the records, Harris and Smith jumped in a car and made a 1,500-mile road trip in four days, visiting dozens of Mexican "importers" and American "suppliers" embroiled in a swindle that stretched from coast to coast and across the Mexican border. They found that some addresses didn't exist. They found firms that didn't make the kind of goods specified on the invoices and companies that had no idea their good names had been stolen. As a result, a San Antonio man was sent to federal prison and one from El Paso was charged in March. Others are still being investigated, and the Export-Import Bank appointed the first inspector general in its history.

"Documents are the key," says Harris. As he speaks, he sits at a conference table picking through a tote bag crammed with papers, receipts, bills, direct-mail ads, and other items—all related to an investigation of firms that take money from banks to maintain abandoned and foreclosed homes, but then fail to pay the mom-and-pop contractors who mow the lawns and do the maintenance.

Harris, Shipp, and Smith all carry miniature Kodak video cameras—hardly larger than an iPhone—that can shoot video when a photographer isn't available or discretion is required. And all three are eager to help other reporters in the newsroom with investigations and stories wherever they can. "I'm so old I know who to call for something," says Harris, with a smile. Having developed an expertise on aircraft, Harris is the newsroom's go-to source on that subject, as well as financial issues. He and Shipp also often swap scripts with other reporters for critiques.

On the wall of his small glass-walled office, Smith has a large and well-worn dry-erase board covered with long lists of stories that Harris and Shipp are working on or might be—if they pan out. Not all do, even after months of effort, and that is one of the things that makes investigative work costly.

Legal work is another expense. Although the WFAA unit has been fortunate to date, the potential for lawsuits in investigative reporting is as real as the necessity of engaging lawyers to vet sensitive reports, at upwards of \$500 per hour—a cost that dampens the investigative appetite of some news

directors. The cost of research and the probability of a suit can be factors in the choice of stories, too.

In the aftermath of an investigation of a grade-changing scandal involving basketball players at a local high school, the family of one named student did sue, but the case was eventually dismissed. Called "A Passing Offense," that series involved a primarily African-American school, South Oak Cliff High School, which took great pride in its winning basketball team. It took more than a year to nail down the facts and convince the teachers—all of them African-American—to go on camera. They described how the head coach and principal had ordered athletes' failing grades changed to passing to make them eligible to play. As a result of the reports and the ensuing school-district examination, the team was stripped of two state championships, though the coach remains.

"Our station took a lot of heat on that story," says Smith, recalling angry letters and charges of "yellow journalism" and implied racism. But, he said, the issue was the integrity of the grading system in the school district. The station management never flinched.

It helps that stations know they have Belo's support for investigative work, says Valentine, gesturing toward the sleek corporate headquarters across the street. Al Tompkins, a veteran broadcast journalist who leads the broadcast and online group at Florida's Poynter Institute, points out that two of the six 2010 duPont-Columbia winners for local television news—KOU-TV in Houston and WWL-TV in New Orleans—are Belo stations. "That alone says something about what Belo thinks of investigations," he says.

'A lot of these units are in their own world. These guys are in the newsroom and on the air three or four times a week.'

AS ECONOMIC PRESSURES HAVE INCREASED, THE ROLE of the most successful investigative units that remain in local news has expanded deeper into the day-to-day life of the newsroom, and away from an older model of investigative journalists as an aloof elite.

"I can strive to be the best investigative reporter in the country, but there's a lot of Pulitzer Prize-winners walking around without a job," said John Ferrugia, an investigative reporter and news anchor at McGraw-Hill Companies' KMGH-TV in Denver. "I have to provide value-added for my business." His unit, which won a 2010 duPont-Columbia award, strives to be a resource for the newsroom, conducting seminars on computer-assisted reporting and looking

for ways that daily news stories can be enhanced through the unit's skills.

Phil Williams, award-winning chief investigative reporter at Landmark Media Enterprises' WTVF-TV in Nashville, is another winner of a 2010 duPont-Columbia Award. A board member of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), he said that he has been encouraging reporters through IRE to think of investigative work as something that can be done daily, even as they address longer pieces.

That represents a change for some investigative units, but it has long been the case with Harris and Shipp at WFAA. "A lot of these units are in their own little world and get on the air three or four times a year. These guys are out in the newsroom and on the air three or four times a week," says reporter Jason Whitley, who came to WFAA two years ago.

Whitely's cubicle is just feet away from identical workstations occupied by Harris and Shipp on one edge of the sprawling newsroom. The investigative reporters routinely pitch in on breaking stories when needed, and often their practiced and critical eyes discover unexpected dimensions in otherwise mundane stories.

In December 2007, for example, the quintessential local Christmastime story promised to be that of a six-year-old girl from Garland, Texas, who won airfare and tickets to a Hannah Montana event in New York with a wrenching essay about her soldier father who had been killed in Iraq. It was a heart-tugging story for most, but it bothered Harris. Having embedded with the military in 2003 during the start of the war in Iraq, he had tracked casualties from Texas ever since—and he didn't recognize the name of the girl's father.

That was because—as a check by Harris with the Department of Defense confirmed—no soldier of that name had been killed in Iraq. Because of what Harris calls his "legitimized skepticism," what might have been just a sweet but phony local tale told by a less experienced reporter catapulted into a sad scandal that made the national news.

For stations with the ability and the will to allocate the resources, this may be the right time to consider investigative reporting as a way to engage viewers and, like WFAA, distinguish themselves in their market, says Hank Price, president and general manager of Hearst Corporation's WXII-TV in Winston-Salem, N.C., and senior director of Northwestern University's Media Management Center. "This is a great time for a station to say: What are the things we do that are important to viewers? I think people ask that question all the time but they don't implement it because they're not willing to say: What are we willing not to do?"

At WFAA, keeping the most reporters on the street and the investigative team working means they may not cover every car crash, house fire, or downed tree covered by all the other stations in town. "At this television station, having an investigative unit differentiates it," says Valentine, when asked about the cost.

"I think the more pertinent question," he says, "is what will it cost you not to have one?" CJR

LISA ANDERSON, a former New York bureau chief for the Chicago Tribune, is a CJR Encore Fellow.



Look at Me!

A writer's search for journalism in the age of branding

BY MAUREEN TKACIK

When I was nineteen and chose to accept the creeping suspicion that I would turn out to be a writer and, by extension, chronically deficient of funds, I made the fiscally prudent decision to drop out of school. I still worked on the college newspaper to which I had sacrificed so much of my grade-point average, writing a weekly gossip column until a brother in the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity threatened to sue over an item I'd written about

his alleged screening for his fraternity brothers of a video he'd filmed of himself having sex with his girlfriend. The threats spooked the editors of *The Daily Pennsylvanian* into suspending the column entirely. This did not bother me, as I thought I had more substantial work to do.

On the other side of town, a virulent heroin epidemic needed to be investigated. It was 1998 and Philadelphia still nurtured a robust-in-hindsight tabloid newspaper called the *Philadelphia Daily News* (motto: "The People Paper"), where I was an intern on the city desk. The summer had required the city desk's near-daily attendance at some photo-op or announcement in a particularly lawless swath of eastern North Philadelphia known as the Badlands. It was the most syringe-blanketed, zombie-infested, bombed-out neighborhood in a town in which achieving a superlative in such categories really meant something, and the city's new celebrity police commissioner, John Timoney, had thrown himself

into an exotic—or quixotic—quest to finally Do Something About It, via a multi-agency siege he called Operation Sunrise.

For all of Timoney's messianic zeal, his efforts instilled little faith in the loose confederation of addiction counselors and rehab providers I met in the Badlands. Their budgets had been gutted by some technicality of welfare reform, the heroin seemed to be getting purer and more noxious every week, and they could not handle the drastic influx of court dates and bail demands they faced as a result of Operation Sunrise's indiscriminate sweeps. A distressing new book on the drug war called *The Fix* illuminated their struggle; although numerous studies had estimated that every dollar spent in the attempt to constrain the *demand* for drugs—especially if those efforts focused on drugs' most conspicuous consumers—was worth ten spent trying to stamp out its supply, the supply-siders had won the debate again and again.

I wanted to alert "the people" of Philadelphia to the misconceptions clouding our heroin problem, so I called the author of *The Fix*. He humored me, and then casually asked if I was aware that John Timoney's daughter, Christine, was a drug addict.

This was tragic, of course, but also a fascinating story. Why was the police chief of an impoverished city with a famously overcrowded prison system and no shortage of rapists and murderers on the loose making it his first order of business to round up and jail a bunch of pathetic heroin addicts...when his own daughter was addicted to the stuff? Was he trying to track her down? Was it a macho thing? What was it like to fight the drug war on two such vastly different fronts? I scheduled an interview for the next week, telling his press officer I wanted to address concerns about the city's "drug treatment infrastructure."

But in the fluorescent glare of Timoney's office, armed with my tape recorder, I felt like an asshole. The murder rate had already dropped drastically in his first few months on the job, and that year it would plunge below 300 after breaking 400 in every year of the previous decade. Who the hell was I? "I've known people who have gone into treatment," he offered, shaking his head and giving me an opening to lamely and awkwardly mention his daughter. When I did, his expression hardened in a way that spooked me. "I don't want to talk about my daughter," he said. I left soon thereafter.

And that was it. My editors instructed me to drop the story, and I left the paper the next month in a routine round of Knight-

Ridder budget cuts. I ended up in Hong Kong, where I'd lived as a kid and where, for the time being, there was some money.

HONG KONG AND PHILADELPHIA HAD LITTLE IN COMMON save for the fact that both cities were deeply conscious of having passed their prime and were vulnerable to cheap highs. In any case, the way Philly took to smack, Hong Kong was falling prey to a particularly deranged case of the global Internet stock addiction. The fact that Hong Kong had no Internet companies—or software companies, hardware companies, engineers, etc.—was a technicality. Opportunistic moneymen easily sidestepped this obstacle thanks to the rich supply of toy companies and trading firms listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. A wealthy investor would simply buy out the small business owner, “inject” some “Internet assets” into the

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company—some URLs, maybe a server or two—pay himself a fee, and watch the stock explode. The fault lines of irrational exuberance were running through most of the mature economies of the world; Hong Kong's Internet craze just seemed a few orders of magnitude more parodic than anything Silicon Valley ever came up with. Small-time shopkeepers who still did their bookkeeping with abacuses lined up by the thousands outside brokerage houses for shares in the latest new “Internet” offerings, even as most residents had never used the Internet in 1999 (though many learned how when they realized it could be used to trade Internet stocks). A local newspaper, the *Hong Kong Standard*, rebranded itself the *Hong Kong iMail*.

I worked at the Asia headquarters of *Time* magazine, where I wrote a daily Internet column chronicling the lunacy of the Asian markets—a subject about which I had no expertise, but that clearly was not stopping anyone. I should state here that my own company, Time Warner, which owned some of the world's biggest magazines and HBO and one of America's most venerable movie studios, was during this time acquired by AOL, a dial-up chat-room business that the market had, in its wisdom, decided was worth \$163 billion, in large part because it had so few clunky “old economy” assets weighing down its stratospheric prospects for growth. That transaction seemed the platonic ideal of the rational market at work next to the epically shameless charlatanism I had to write about.

Within a year I had developed enough of a “following” to

warrant being offered a gig at double my salary with an Internet startup, and a two-page profile in the aforementioned *iMail* followed soon. My friend Stephen, a British film writer, was quoted marveling over the “minor celebrity-cult status” I had built up in such a short time.

I left Hong Kong shortly after the story ran, for no particular reason other than a psychic nausea over how easy it had been to achieve as much as I had wanted there. It took a few months, but by the spring of 2001, I found a reporting spot in the Los Angeles bureau of *The Wall Street Journal*.

BY THIS POINT, I HAD BEGUN TO DEVELOP A THEORY, PARTLY by virtue of having experienced that one meaningful failure and one meaningless success, about generally what was wrong with the world and increasingly with the industry—journalism—that was attempting to convey it. I just didn't know yet what I knew, and so this story stretches on for another nine years.

What I sensed was that while the laws of supply and demand governed everything on earth, the easy money was in demand—manufacturing it, manipulating it, sending it forth to multiply, etc. As a rule of thumb (and with some notable exceptions), the profit margins you could achieve selling a good or service were directly correlated to the total idiocy and/or moral bankruptcy of the demand you drummed up for it.

This was easier to grasp if you were in the business of peddling heroin, Internet stocks, or celebrity gossip; journalists, on the other hand, were at a conspicuous disadvantage when it came to understanding their role in this equation. In the past, newspapers had made respectable margins selling a non-inane product largely because people had little choice but to herald their subtleties and white sales alongside the journalists' tales of human suffering/corporate corruption/government ineptitude. The times were prosperous enough that much of the print media even chose to abstain from taking a share of the demand-creation campaigns of liquor and tobacco brands in the seventies and eighties. Indeed, journalism, it went without saying, was about delivering important information about the world—information people (and democracy!) needed, whether they knew it or not. That journalism's ability to deliver that information—to fill that need—ultimately depended, to an unsettling degree, on the ability to create artificial demand for a lot of stuff that people didn't actually need—luxury condos, ergonomically correct airplane seats, the latest celebrity-endorsed scent—was an afterthought at best, at least in the newsroom.

Journalists, by and large, had so little appreciation for their dependence on the larger engine of artificial demand that they were mostly blindsided when the Internet happened and they lost the benefits of that engine. A lot of them seemed to take it personally. They got insecure. Some started writing “trend” stories and giving over their column inches to celebrity newswires and sincerely talking about bylines (and politicians and everything else) as “brands.” They sold Time Warner to an absurdly overinflated dot-com. It's not fair, of course, to blame only the journalists; there were mostly

avowed capitalists in the corner offices of these places, and it is the fiduciary responsibility of capitalists to be as cowardly and uncreative as possible in times of fear and change.

This existential angst tormented even the commerce-savvy staff of the *Journal*, where I was assigned to the "youth" beat—which is to say, and it very much went without saying, youthful consumption trends. I was too young to realize that this was one of the few subjects about which young reporters, particularly the female ones, were trusted to cover with any measure of authority—because really, who gives a shit? I embedded myself on the front lines of the brand wars as if posterity really cared whether a popular new celebrity-endorsed offering from Nike or Adidas or Mattel or Urban Outfitters had yielded a noticeable market-share loss or gain that quarter. (To be fair, some hedge funds cared about this.)

Despite the superficiality of this beat, the people who inhabited it—the brands that were in demand—had money, power, and an attendant sense of entitlement that could be intimidating. At twenty-three, I felt sufficiently ancient and uncool to be consistently alarmed when, say, a sixteen-year-old small forward from Akron wrote me an angry two-way pager message when I respectfully declined his invitation to party in his hotel suite following a high school basketball tournament, or I awoke from a minor sneaker brand's after-party to find a nineteen-year-old San Bernardino skateboarder attempting nonconsensual sex with me, or even when young celebrity stylists seemed sincerely to want to be my friend. I did not really identify with the cool-hunting, brand-building, sneaker-collecting generation of professional consumers I

And so when the time came to resume the regimen of inquiries into whether Barbie dolls could reclaim supremacy from the insurgent Bratz, or rappers could be convinced to switch sneaker brand allegiances from Nike to Reebok, and was the preeminent patron saint of pre-adolescent sartorial taste Britney Spears or Avril Lavigne... well, that was something of a relief, too. The biggest relief, though, would come when I was fired.

THERE WERE REAL STORIES ON MY BEAT, OF COURSE. IT alarmed me, for instance, to learn that one of the companies in my "youth" sector, the mall chain Abercrombie & Fitch, made a weekly practice of purging its stores of hourly sales associates it deemed to be less than, in corporate parlance, "brand positive."

The purges were identified, a former regional manager explained, every week at corporate headquarters in New Albany, Ohio, during a conference call held specifically to critique photographs taken that week by the chain's hundred or so district managers of all the "brand representatives" they had encountered in visits to their stores. The photos were uploaded onto some sort of company intranet, but my source told me his boss preferred printing them out on paper, so he could circle flaws, draw mustaches, scrawl racist epithets, etc. The source said braces, minor breakouts, the faintest possibility of weight gain, showing up to work in a prior season's ensemble, wearing shoes that had not appeared on the list of authorized footwear for that season, and/or belonging to an

I embedded myself on the front lines of the brand wars as if posterity really cared whether a new offering from Nike yielded a market-share gain or loss.

worked over for trend-story ideas, but neither did my colleagues in the bureau seem to identify with the megalomaniacal talent agents and casino magnates or the disgruntled aerospace engineers and short sellers they talked to all day.

So it wasn't a total surprise that, amid the horror and sadness of September 11, I had also a sense of professional relief. I got to drive to San Diego to track down acquaintances of two Flight 77 hijackers who'd lived there, and generally conduct research on the local Muslim community. For the next six months, the paper was buoyed by a freak surge in demand for real journalism and its dusty byproducts—like collaboration, curiosity, a common sense of purpose. Of course, looking back, I also remember a lot of hysterical turf-warring, baseless speculating, and an overall atmosphere of humorlessness. (When I was dispatched to New Jersey to assist the "anthrax team" in attending the daily round of alarmist press briefings, for instance, a joking inquiry as to what sort of gas mask I ought to bring drew an earnest e-mail advising me that a preemptive course of Cipro might be more comfortable.)

ethnic minority could all be grounds for immediate dismissal from the ranks of Abercrombie & Fitch's minimum-wage cadre of demand creators.

I went to great lengths to corroborate the facts, which is where I fucked up; I e-mailed a draft of the piece (a decision inspired by a respected journalist I'd read about who said he did this all the time) to a trusted source, and he e-mailed it to someone else, and eventually it made its way to Abercrombie's corporate offices and in turn to the company's fearsome New York "crisis PR" firm. And because *Wall Street Journal* investigations are the sort of thing that affects the stock prices of companies, this was a fireable offense. In retrospect, as much as I felt like a failure and a fuckup, I didn't actually mind being liberated from the constant, insane pressure not to fuck up. All year I'd been variously accused of being "in the pocket" of one company or its rival by analysts, money managers, publicists, lawyers, etc., and I'd found it preposterous. What did I care who prevailed in the sneaker wars or the doll wars or the Japanese-hipster-credibility-halo-effect wars?

What I couldn't understand, though, was why they killed the story. Sure, it wasn't Blackwater, but this was a store that at least half our readers' kids would have killed to work for, and it was being run by some racist, frat-boy cult, and the suburban teenagers it hired and fired so mercurially were going to grow into adults who thought this was...normal? That in the modern American workplace, this sort of Lord-of-the-Flies management strategy was just par for the fucking course?

I ended up handing over my notes to a civil-rights lawyer who was leading a class-action race-discrimination suit against Abercrombie. A few years later, more than ten thousand former brand representatives got checks in the mail as part of the \$40 million settlement.

IN 2004, I WAS AGAIN LIVING IN PHILADELPHIA. A GUY FOR whom I had transcribed some interviews at *Philadelphia* magazine back in college had been named editor-in-chief, and he offered me a chance at journalistic salvation. He had room in his budget for a young staff writer, but I had to freelance something first. I snagged a job at a downtown phone-sex call center, and six weeks later I had my piece—and another insight about journalism. "Phone sex," I wrote,

is not so unlike being a reporter. A central challenge of success at both is keeping random strangers—horny guys, hostile hedge-fund managers—on the phone, talking to you, confessing to you, growing fond of you, resolving to talk to you again. And at all times, phone-sex operators, like reporters, are expected to remain detached, wise to "The Game," objective—but in a way, that's crap. It's not easy to become beloved by strangers if not a single part of you truly yearns for that love.

The stranger thing about phone sex, though, was that the training program was more rigorous and extensive than any I'd encountered in journalism. There was a day and a half in a classroom learning such phone-sex fundamentals as the "hot statement" and the "ego stroke," daily feedback sessions with supervisors who listened in on calls, a mandatory creative-writing contest for the best Halloween-themed fantasy scenario, refresher courses to hone fluency in more exotic proclivities, individual binders in which we recorded our progress in this stuff and collected, as per instruction, magazine clippings—*Penthouse* letters, perfume advertisements, etc.—whatever we found erotically inspiring. When my supervisor's boss learned I was writing a story, he unfurled all the usual legal threats, but when it was published, the

company ordered hundreds of reprints to dispense to new hires at orientation. They did not expect you to be some innate phone-sex genius, but they had full faith that you could get immeasurably better, especially if you wanted to, and they genuinely seemed to take it as a given that people wanted to become better at things they did.

For me, an enduring frustration of traditional journalism is that what training you do get centers on the imperative to discount and dismiss your own experiences in pursuit of some objective ideal, even as journalism simultaneously exposes you to an unusually large variety of experiences. The idea that it might be a good thing to attempt to apply insights gleaned from those experiences to future stories—let alone synthesize it all into any sort of coherent narrative—rarely comes up, unless you're a columnist. This can be an especially torturous dilemma during the inevitable low point at which the journalist—this one, anyway—comes to believe that the only feasible course of action (given the state of journalism) is to secure a six-figure book deal, and commences filling her off-hours in a feeble attempt to "write what you know." *I know a lot of things, taunts the endless negative feedback loop, but none of them is how to make six figures.*

With my journalistic redemption under way, and finding that redemption alone doesn't necessarily pay the rent, I started a book proposal about something I termed "The Nothing-Based Economy." The argument was pretty simple: the American economy had become so enthralled with the endless cultivation and expansion of *demand* that it had become totally divorced from the reality of *need*. This was not an inevitability that Marx and Mao and the movie *Idiocracy* hadn't grappled with already, but I was just a journalist and those were just the facts. Drug companies founded to cure diseases had a duty to shareholders to never cure anything so long as tens of millions of Americans reliably spent hundreds of dollars a month on the nebulous array of chronic maladies pharmaceutical companies had invented to treat. Bankers who still (incredibly) claimed to facilitate "efficient allocation of capital" were in actuality beholden to the trading-desk arbitrageurs who couldn't make money unless their corporate finance departments concocted a steady stream of "innovations" by which to render markets more inefficient. Every last function of government was being outsourced to some contractor with the fiduciary obligation to ensure that taxpayers wasted as much money as possible.

Abercrombie and LeBron James and AOL informed this observation, as had some stories I'd written for *Philadelphia* magazine: the year I spent shadowing a Wharton MBA class,

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for instance, on its punishing schedule of leadership classes and campfire retreats and networking events that seemed deliberately designed to impart no ideas, hone no skills, and prepare the students for nothing beyond spending an inordinate amount of time in the company of people very similar to themselves; or the investigation into Donald Trump's resur-

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gence as a "virtual developer" who licensed his name to the sort of luxury-condo projects where the deeds would change hands five times before the thing was even built.

This was all well and good, at least as underlying theories went, but of the fourteen distinct genera of profitable nonfiction books my agent had identified in his many years of sales analysis, he said my idea sounded most like an "I'm Right And You're Totally Wrong" book. The appeal of such a book rests on the author having achieved a degree of personal-brand credibility, and since neither of us could remember a blurb along the lines of "regional magazine staffer calls bullshit on the American economy" following an entry on *The New York Times* best-seller list, I complied when my agent suggested I pursue instead an "exposé," in which the author "draws on inside knowledge"—possibly acquired "as a reporter willing to live through a terrible experience"—to "regale us with stories about how much more awful things are than they appear on the surface."

So in 2006, I took a job at American Apparel. You are probably aware that American Apparel had (and has) two primary reasons for notoriety: that it actually manufactures (in downtown Los Angeles, no less) the clothes it sells, and that its controversial founder and CEO, Dov Charney, decided to open hundreds of conspicuously located urban stores at the peak of the real-estate bubble, and staff them mostly with a revolving cast of underage-looking girls who were willing to work management-consultant hours for \$9 an hour and a shot at being invited to pose for one of the trademark semi-pornographic employee photo shoots the company uses to advertise, if not its clothes, its "brand."

American Apparel seemed to me a tweaked-out metaphor for the country itself, the way it had strategically shifted the hero of its exceptionalism narrative from its factory to its cast of disposable young people who are endowed with little besides their looks and the desire to broadcast their youthful insouciance to a wider audience.

My agent, though, hated the American Apparel stories. "It's like one big contest for who can be the most vapid," he

wrote in a withering takedown of my sample chapter. "None of the characters you draw are remotely likable, or entertaining; nor do they illuminate anything." I didn't disagree about the vapid part, but—hello—that was sort of the point.

THE NEXT YEAR, 2007, I TOOK A JOB AT GAWKER MEDIA helping launch a sister blog targeted at Gawker's demographically attractive female readership—a property that was named Jezebel, at the insistence of Gawker CEO and founder Nick Denton and against my vociferous objections, after the blasphemous Old Testament whore who was eventually eaten alive by dogs. Gawker was in the business of gossip-blogging, an insidious racket that I and most members of my profession held partially responsible for the destruction of journalism.

But I also saw Gawker as American Apparel's journalistic equivalent, and I justified taking the job by thinking of it as the next chapter in my immersion in the nothing-based economy, in which I would make the natural transition from creating demand for someone else's brand to creating demand for my own. In hindsight, though, it seems obvious that Gawker had subconsciously inspired the whole book project in the first place.

I had started reading Gawker's flagship site around the time it was founded, in 2002, because it was a media gossip blog and I was in the media. Back then, the comically bland Jim Romenesko had cornered the market on this sort of inside baseball, and Gawker, by contrast, was puerile, funny, and refreshing. Gawker writers covered the media and publishing industries as if it were all your typical inane celebrity bullshit, and padded their media and publishing coverage with actual inane celebrity bullshit—and padded that further by identifying (or inventing) a sort of pseudo-celebrity vortex of New York unknowns who wanted so badly to achieve some measure of what one of them called "microfame" that they would say or do almost anything to warrant another post on Gawker. Muddling these things together on one sarcastic Web site was popular with readers, but over time whatever I had found refreshing about it began to feel psychically draining.

I finally quit reading Gawker's flagship site altogether after a post about the heated jockeying among *New York Times* reporters over which stories landed on the "Most Emailed" list. I didn't know why anyone in the nation's most-respected newsroom would compete for the pro-bono, viral marketing services of a group of readers who demonstrably only care about a story if it concerns food, weight loss, or admittance into an Ivy League college—and I didn't want to know. I had a sort of not-in-my-backyard unease about the nothing-based economy. While journalism had not exactly rewarded me in any quantifiable way, it had exposed me to a large number of people who had taken this vow of poverty for a lot of reasons other than the opportunity to endlessly debate the relative merits of carbohydrates and get their photos taken at parties.

But I also stopped reading it, probably, because it was 2004 and Gawker had just launched another diversion on which I happily lavished attention: the politics blog Wonkette.

Wonkette was written by a journalist in her early thirties named Ana Marie Cox who covered D.C. with a dry and cutting wit that I was sure would be lost on the sort of people who control the Most E-Mailed list. But then she landed her first big "scoop," about the existence of a blog called Washingtonienne kept by an anonymous Capitol Hill staffer who supplemented her income by sleeping with older, married, power-broker types. This being precisely the sort of self-promotional scheme New York's great unabashed masses were increasingly obliging Gawker to blog about, I would have totally ignored it had Cox not taken the opportunity to post some photos of herself posing with the Washingtonienne at a club. The Washingtonienne looked sort of damaged next to the elder Wonkette, who looked like she had spent an inordinate amount of time practicing in front of the mirror for this moment. Within months Cox's image would appear in many bigger media outlets, including on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, which expended numerous paragraphs corroborating my suspicions by chronicling her childhood in Lincoln, Nebraska, spent watching *Breakfast At Tiffany's* and dreaming of fame, her bliss over being offered a gig on MTV News, and dejection when said gig did not produce a full-time job. "I couldn't figure it out," the author, Matthew Klam, wrote. "Why was she so excited about working for MTV? MTV is for nine-year-olds. It's so 1992. It was as if her sense of what was cool and what was stupid, so unerring on her blog, had abandoned her."

Thank the deities, I remember thinking at the time, someone called her out on it. This virulent new self-obsessed model for journalistic success needs to be stopped.

Ha.

ORGANIZATIONALLY, GAWKER COULD NOT HAVE BEEN A purer embodiment of nothing-based dystopia at work in the media. For most of my time there, bloggers earned bonuses that were tied to the page views their posts received, so the leisurely three minutes required to download a haggard image of Amy Winehouse from a celebrity photo agency and post it with a five-word caption was rewarded as generously as the frenzied hour and a half spent compiling the daily roundup of celebrity gossip, and at least twice as generously as anything I actually wanted to spend an hour and a half writing about. Beyond that, awarding page-view bonuses clearly encouraged bloggers to fight over tips and news items that fell into the realm of "obvious traffic getters," and discouraged us from collaborating in any effort more substantial than the odd round of company-subsidized drinks.

When hiring female bloggers, the company also maintained a bias toward the young and photogenic, and by the time I got there, it occasionally posted on its sites softly lit pictures of its female employees, much in the way American Apparel had done. During my first few months at the company, Emily Gould, a blogger for the flagship site, even posted a photo of herself wearing an American Apparel swimsuit and giving the finger. Anyone who worked for Gawker Media in the summer of 2007 attaches the swimsuit image to a "phase" our colleague was in the throes of which depleted

a tremendous amount of our collective attention via instant message, a phase one veteran blogger likened to that experienced by Cox in her Wonkette era. Gould graced the cover of the *Times Magazine* the next spring, four years after Cox, lying on her bed in a tank top gazing sleepily at the camera.

It makes sense that a readership so universally practiced in the faking of things—orgasms, hair color, age—would humor my intolerance for fakery.

The photos, along with Gould's essay about life as a blogger, elicited a deluge of vicious Internet commentary, often from other bloggers who felt Gould had given blogging a bad name—"Some bloggers are able to write about things other than themselves. Seriously," huffed *New York* magazine's Daily Intel blog, a Gawker competitor. And following numerous demands from Jezebel readers that we somehow "weigh in," I obliged with a post in which I jokingly advanced a theory that Denton had created Gawker with the intention of destroying journalism by infecting its practitioners with a lethal addiction to a kind of reality-TV version of the media, in which "mundane trivialities" and "the ceaseless trade of imaginary currency" kept them impervious to the alarming shortage of real currency—both pay and prestige—in the business by supplanting any underlying theoretical purpose journalism might initially have been invented to serve. That afternoon I ran into Denton at the office.

"I liked your post," he said, which was his typical response to negative attention.

"Yeah, I mean, I don't know what all the fuss is over," I said. "They're not even particularly hot photos, for Emily."

"Well, and why does anyone become a *writer* in the first place?" he asked, stressing the first syllable of "writer," as if the word itself could only ever be uttered with implied air quotes. "The same reason they start playing guitar in high school and try forming bands. To draw attention to themselves."

CONSIDERING ALL THIS, IT SEEMS ODD TO TELL YOU THAT working for Gawker Media was probably the least-demoralizing media job I've ever held. The principal reason is that I eventually blundered into an unexpected intimacy with readers on the dreaded "demand" side of the equation, who turned out to want something other than, or in addition to, what everyone and their algorithms suggested.

Producing a Web site that targets women requires engaging with the topics that have always been the focus of media that target women. But since for me this was mostly an experiment in personal brand-building, I did not feel compelled to

conceal my contempt for these topics, and for the reprobate economic forces that, I reasoned, had forced me to write about them. Contempt would just have to be part of the “Moe Tkacik brand” (which was not to be confused with the body of mostly respectable journalism produced by Maureen Tkacik).

Of all the resentments I had accumulated before coming to Jezebel, I had never much dwelled on the misfortune of being born a woman. But women, who so disproportionately bear the nothing-based economy’s unrelenting fusillade of invented insecurities and predatory sales pitches, were ideally positioned to share my list of grievances. It makes sense, in retrospect, that a readership so universally practiced in the faking of things—orgasms, hair color, age, disinterest in men one was actually interested in, etc.—would humor the intolerance for fakery that helped define the “Moe Tkacik brand,” which was basically an angrier, more recklessly confessional, and more contemptuous version of myself.

This point about fakery was driven home for me by a (pretty brilliant) idea that Nick Denton had—to offer a cash reward to whichever turncoat from a women’s magazine slipped us the most egregious example of a retouched cover image. The winner submitted the original version of a ludicrously altered *Redbook* cover featuring the country singer Faith Hill, which I posted, along with the published cover and a fake art-department memo, under the tagline, “Photoshop of Horrors.” The thing paid for itself with a deluge of traffic and all manner of “mainstream” media attention.

But the real revelation, to me at least, was that the readers who came for Faith Hill returned for posts about the Iranian insurgency, the foreclosure crisis, military contracting,

sistently bestowed its greatest rewards on those capable of projecting a kind of elusive authority that turns consumers’ fears, insecurities, aspirations, unarticulated dreams, etc. into healthy profit margins. But a sense of humanity is also a kind of authority. And maybe the best policy for our beaten-down population of journalists just naturally involves letting down the old guard of objectivity and letting go of illusions of unimpeachability. Rather than train journalists to dismiss their own experiences, what if we trained them to use those experiences to help them explain the news to their audience? Allow their humanity to shape their journalism? This isn’t some radically profound notion—it only seems that way in the context of the ridiculous zero-sum debate over the relative merits of “straight” news versus the self-absorbed nature of blogs. Maybe there is a way to combine the best of both.

If journalism’s more vital traditions of investigating corruption and synthesizing complex topics are going to be restored, it will never be at the expense of the personal, the sexual, the venal, or the sensational, but rather through mastering the kind of storytelling that understands that none of those things exists in a vacuum. For instance, perhaps the latest political sex scandal is not simply another installment of the unrelenting narcissism and sense of invincibility of people in power. Most of the journalists writing about it have—as we all do—some understanding of the internal conflicts that lead to personal failure. By humanizing journalism, we maybe can begin to develop a mutual trust between reader and writer that would benefit both.

What I’m talking about is, of course, a lot easier to do with the creative liberties afforded a blog—one’s humanity is

I copped to all manner of offenses that I would have elided in earlier jobs: unprotected sex, a history of eating disorders, belief in God, etc.

campaign finance, corporate malfeasance, the global food crisis—essentially whatever I found outrageous or absurd or interesting on a given day.

When I realized I could be more honest and funnier about a wider array of topics than any other job had allowed—let alone demanded—I felt I owed it to the readers to become something more than the scornful persona that was Gawker’s trademark. When the timeless dilemmas of dating and dieting and “having it all” invariably cropped up, I felt both liberated and obligated to “overshare,” as they say, coping to all manner of offenses I would have elided in earlier jobs: unprotected sex, a history of eating disorders, a newfound dependence on attention-deficit-disorder drugs, belief in God, etc. This enabled me to more honestly confront feminist pieties and hypocrisies, write more vividly and confidently, and perhaps even challenge the stereotypes about “women who write about shit that happened to them.”

From a commercial perspective, “branding” has con-

inescapable when one commits to blogging all day for a living. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Andrew Sullivan, one of journalism’s preeminent blogging brands, is one of very few journalists to have endured his own sordid sex scandal. Or that Josh Marshall, the studiously wonky founder of Talking Points Memo, reacted to the adultery-provoked downfall of South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, Marshall’s ideological foe, by entreating Sanford, whom Marshall described as seeming “deeply in love” with his mistress, to “Just Go Be With Her!”

LAST YEAR, MICHAEL MASSING, THE GUY WHO ORIGINALLY gave me the tip about John Timoney more than a decade ago (and who is a contributing editor to this magazine), sent an e-mail to Talking Points Memo, where I was doing a stint covering the financial crisis. He wanted to drop by the office for a *New York Review of Books* think piece on “the future of

journalism." I wrote back and suggested we first meet for a drink. Over Bloody Marys I told him that I'd work for Goldman Sachs in a second if they'd have me. "Don't say that!" he replied, as if he would have censored the very thought if he could. So I had to explain just how depressing it was to look ahead while my own future remained so inextricable from the future of journalism.

Which is how I came to write this. One day I was casually telling Massing how an old friend of mine from the *Journal*, a sweet, respectable thirty-year-old with a husband and no personality disorders or history of substance abuse, had recently quit full-time journalism and started freelancing so she could also write poetry—"I can't imagine what the twenty-two-year-old J-school me would think," she told me, "but I just couldn't see how I could get any *better* without branching out from journalism"—and a month (and several more conversations) later Massing e-mailed a suggestion that I should write about "the life of a young urban writer now."

So I wrote what I know, or rather what I've learned, which could be summed up this way: when the Internet forced journalism to compete economically after years of monopoly, journalism panicked and adopted some of the worst examples of the nothing-based economy, in which success depends on the continued infantilization of both supply and demand. At the same time, journalism clung to its myths of objectivity and detachment, using them to dismiss the emerging blogger threat as something unserious and fundamentally parasitic, even as it produced a steady stream of obsessive but sneering trend stories on the blogosphere.

Consider the breathless (and stylishly photographed) April 1 piece in *The New York Times* that spotlighted the "notable scoops" broken by the latest microgeneration of up-and-coming gossip bloggers—two had involved sub-subplots of the lives of reality-show starlets, one was about NBC's Black History Month cafeteria menu, another was referred to as "an 'investigation' into the White House budget

I had to explain to him just how depressing it was to look ahead when my own future remained so inextricable from the future of journalism.

director Peter Orszag's hair," and the rest were arguably less meaty than those.

Yet one of the featured "next big thing" bloggers was twenty-six-year-old Bess Levin of the Wall Street blog Deal-breaker. The *Times* had listed as Levin's "notable scoop" her procurement of an embarrassing party invitation sent out by the "prominent but discreet" hedge-fund manager Steven A. Cohen. Tellingly, the *Times* failed to mention several much

more notable "scoops" Levin had published about Cohen's hedge fund, such as the one about the portfolio manager who was sued by one of his (male) former traders in what was perhaps the most disturbing sexual harassment complaint in Wall Street history. (And I have read at least fifty of them.)

More troubling was that the *Times* listed as Levin's "memorable gaffe" a post in late 2008 in which she reported what she termed an "unfounded rumor" that a major hedge fund's prime brokers were threatening liquidation. "It turns out the rumor was indeed 'unfounded,' so she quickly removed it under pressure," the *Times* explained in a condescending sentence that could have only been written by someone who didn't understand that in 2008 virtually all hedge funds were so massively leveraged—in an effort to amp returns—that the threat of liquidation was perpetually on the table.

This passage lays bare an old-media strategy of dismissing bloggers by policing the permeable walls between news and gossip, analysis and opinion, perspective and attention-seeking. Hedge funds are largely unregulated; "news" about them is often inextricable from "rumor." It is this disturbing reality that has helped make Bess Levin's "gossip blog" an important source of information about the financial industry.

So, in this context, her pulling this "rumor" can either be seen as a "gaffe" or, given the obvious power imbalances, an example of a hedge-fund manager trying to save his ass and/or blow off steam by intimidating some kid two years out of college.

BACK IN 2008, DURING THAT WEEK AFTER LEHMAN BROTHERS declared bankruptcy and raised the curtain on the global credit crisis that would in short order serve as Nick Denton's rationale for firing me and eighteen other Gawker staffers, Denton had asked me to write a post blaming journalists for the financial crisis. This idea bordered on lunacy, and I refused, even when he explained the foundation of his argument, which basically amounted to: he had worked at the *Financial Times* in the late nineties, and he said he'd tried repeatedly to write stories probing the potential dangers of unregulated derivatives and the stunning amount of leverage that went along with their use, etc., but his bosses invariably told him, in so many words, to bugger off.

"I am *telling* you," he insisted. "I tried *so many times* to write those stories. It was always, 'No, no, no. Don't you understand? That's *innovation*.'"

And he was right; about derivatives but also maybe about journalists, many of whom I had also seen over the years apply their well-honed skepticism to just about everything but the age-old imperative to "follow the money," as so many trillions of dollars re-appropriated themselves in the tax shelters and tropical holding companies of the super-rich. Maybe Denton's editors assumed he was just trying to draw attention to himself, like all those photogenic, gaffe-prone gossip bloggers. And to that end, given Gawker's success, he has certainly gotten the last laugh. Although I think he might even agree with me that it's not much of an end. **CJR**

MAUREEN TKACIK is (still) a writer who lives in New York.

Stayin' Alive

Christopher R. Weingarten is determined to be the last rock critic standing

BY JUSTIN PETERS

Christopher R. Weingarten reviews records on Twitter under the name “1000TimesYes.” In January, he decided to make a full set of his 2009 tweet-reviews, neatly typed out on cards, available for purchase. Potential buyers had many options. For nine dollars, you’d get one postcard featuring the tweet-review of your choice, plus a personal phone call from Weingarten so that the two of you could “totally bullshit about bands.” Seventy-five dollars would

buy the whole set of 1,000 tweets. For \$875, you’d get the full set of tweets encased in a wooden box hand-carved by Weingarten’s father, made from “rich Virginia cherry” and “select American black walnut of gunstock quality,” among other woods.

All told, the sale brought in over eleven hundred dollars, making Weingarten one of the few people so far to have successfully monetized Twitter. Nobody bought the hand-carved box, though, an outcome he blames on his inability to persuade his father to lower his price. “My father told me about all these fantastical woods and antique hinges,” Weingarten said, remembering the dialogue between him and his father. “I said: ‘This sounds amazing.’ He said: ‘A thousand bucks.’ ‘How much is this going to cost you?’ ‘Oh, this is all stuff I have laying around the house.’ ‘Dad, you don’t really understand how DIY works.’”

Journalists these days are told that they have to be good at

a lot of things: they have to produce for multiple platforms; they have to push their personal brand; they have to do more with less. As much as anybody else in the business, Weingarten has taken that advice to heart. When he’s not reviewing new records on Twitter—he did 1,000 tweet-reviews last year, all of them 140 characters or less—he’s writing slightly longer ones for outlets like Fuse, *The Village Voice*, and Rollingstone.com. He’s extremely active on the ILXOR music message board, where he goes by the name “Whiney G. Weingarten.” He wrote the cover story for the March/April issue of *Revolver*, a eleven-page history of hard-rock tattoos. His book about Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* was recently released by Continuum, as part of its 33 1/3 series of books about individual albums. He runs a Web site called Hipster Puppies, featuring photographs of dogs dressed in horn-rimmed glasses and hooded sweatshirts. The “bio” section of his Twitter page reads “Christopher R. Weingarten // Last Rock Critic Standing.”

“I’ve had pay cuts from places I’ve been writing for for years,” he said. “[*Village Voice* music critic] Richard Gehr said, ‘We’re all working now twice as hard for half as much money.’ Every year it gets harder and harder.” If professional critics are to survive in this increasingly hostile environment, they have to adapt; Weingarten is doing his best to ensure that he evolves faster than anybody else.

“This isn’t a side hustle,” he says. “This is my full-time hustle.”

WEINGARTEN IS RARELY IN TOTAL SILENCE. “I TRY TO LISTEN to music as big a percentage of my time as humanly possible,” he says. “Sometimes, when people point me out, they say, ‘Oh, yeah, he’ll be wearing headphones.’” His headphones are bulky, noise-attenuating Sennheisers that cup the entire ear; nothing extraneous gets in, nothing musical gets out.

You really couldn’t mistake him for anything other than a professional critic. Part of it’s the look—headphones, music-themed apparel, thick glasses, heavy beard—as if he just stepped off the set of the movie *High Fidelity*. But it’s mostly the enthusiasm; the cultural excitations that can prompt blunt, rapid-fire disquisitions on the things he likes (hip-hop, the CD format, the critic Chuck Eddy) and the things he does not (Fleet Foxes, singer-songwriter music, the comedians Tim and Eric). He is the sort of person who not only brags



about his world-class collection of Christmas rap music, but will forcefully argue the musical merits of certain items from that collection; the sort of person who, when attending a weekend music festival, will try to see all forty-six shows on the bill. He did this in 2008, in rural England, at the All Tomorrow's Parties festival co-curated by Mike Patton and The Melvins, an experience he calls the greatest weekend of his life. "It was very difficult. My feet were sandbags at the end," he admits. But, on the other hand, "The Melvins are my favorite band in the world. I didn't want to miss this day of music that they co-curated."

Weingarten is thirty. He grew up on Florida's Gulf Coast and studied journalism at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. There, he wrote about music for the student newspaper, the *Independent Florida Alligator*, and fronted a band called the Christopher Weingarten Basement Funk Allstars, where he was known, according to the Web magazine Ink19, for "running around like a maniac, hilariously insulting the audience" and "playing the roto-toms, keyboards, and yes, the Theremin."

After finishing school in 2002, he quickly made his way to New York, where he set about finding work as a music writer. While "rock critic" has never been a particularly lucrative career choice, it made much more sense back then—there were plenty of outlets for which to write, and reviewers could supplement their income by reselling the advance CDs that came in the mail. ("I do not get as many records as I used to. Labels are sending less CD promos every year," he complains.)

From 2002 to 2006, he held various positions at *CMJ New Music Monthly*—intern, associate editor, editorial coordinator, music editor—where he wrote features, reviews, and columns, before leaving to edit a new Web site called Paper Thin Walls. Unlike some other music sites, Paper Thin Walls—which was purchased by Getty Images in 2007—made a point of paying its contributors; because of that, the site attracted several well-known names—Frank Kogan, Michael Azerrad, and Michaelangelo Matos among them. "We had all the best writers," he says. "We paid writers what they're worth to write."

Perhaps predictably, the site shuttered in September 2008, and Weingarten left music writing behind for a while, taking a job writing for a celebrity photo and gossip site called Jamd. The work didn't suit him, and he was laid off soon thereafter. "I didn't feel right doing it," he said. "I don't feel right doing anything I'm not passionate about." It was around this time that he started his Twitter account.

WHEN WEINGARTEN BEGAN THE 1000TIMESYES PROJECT in January 2009, he was out of professional music writing, on the brink of unemployment, and looking for a way to rejoin the critical conversation. By the time he reviewed his final record of the year, on December 22 ("1000)Susan Boyle/I Dreamed A Dream: Fuck you, 2009.#2.5"), over 5,000 people were following his tweets. He had received multiple speaking invitations, inspired an homage Twitter account, "1000TimesNo," and was the subject of interviews or feature

articles in numerous publications ("If there were a congressional medal for rock criticism, this year's recipient would be Christopher R. Weingarten," wrote Toronto's *Eye Weekly*). "I did not imagine it being as big as it was," he says. "I did not expect people to buy fucking boxes of tweets."

Twitter, he found, was a medium that played to his strengths. "I like short, punchy. I like one-liners," he says. "I would so much rather write and read a very crisp two hundred words than read a twenty-graf bleating. To me, it's more important to make those words count. I learned that writing headlines in journalism school."

Packed with references to other bands, often impressionistic, many of his tweet-reviews will confuse people who aren't already steeped in modern music culture. Yet when they work, they work well—concise, funny, communicating all you need to know about a record in 140 characters or less, with a one-to-ten rating at the end of each tweet. Take review number 845, of Carrie Underwood's *Play On*: "The most complex human emotion rendered as a hilarious puke-stream of pop clichés.#2." Or 497, of Soft Black's *The Earth Is*

If his tweets work as music criticism, they also work as parody, as rejoinders to the glib, callow enthusiasms that characterize much of the music blogosphere.

Black: "Far too soft and not nearly black enough.#4.5." Or 176, of Bibio's *Vignetting the Compost*: "A fourth album of drone-and-strum that's gorgeous enough for art, not otherworldly enough for bliss.=6."

Much of his success in the medium is due to the fact that he uses it well. Yet if his tweets work as music criticism, they also work as parody, as rejoinders to the glib, callow enthusiasms that characterize much of the music blogosphere. "They'll go with whatever comes fastest," he says, referring to people who like to read about bands on the Internet. "I could spend the whole night trying to find the right words to say something, and they just want information." With 1000TimesYes, one could argue, Weingarten is both warning the music world of where it is headed and embracing that future as best he can, if only because he has no other choice.

In June 2009, Weingarten gave a very short speech at the

140 Characters Conference, a two-day gathering of Twitter users and enthusiasts in midtown Manhattan. Rick Sanchez, the spirited CNN reporter, was there; so was Ann Curry of NBC; so was Wyclef Jean. In keeping with the medium's inherent brevity, no speaker was allowed to go for longer than ten minutes. Weingarten's topic was the Internet's effect on music criticism, and, from the top, it was clear that he had no interest in pandering to his audience: "I am Christopher R. Weingarten. I am a freelance writer for Rollingstone.com, *The Village Voice*, *Revolver* magazine, *Decibel* magazine, [the Web site] Idolator, and more. By this time next year, I'm going to need a new job."

He went on to speak about how the Internet was destroying decent rock criticism; how the tide of online enthusiasms tended to elevate not the best music, but the music the most people could stand; how, without professional critics to champion legitimately praiseworthy material, that material would never find an audience. "If you let the people decide, then nothing truly adventurous ever gets out, and that's a problem," he said, pounding the podium for emphasis.

The speech drew cheers from the crowd, but Weingarten thinks it likely that, rather than cheering his message, they were simply excited to hear "a lot of apoplexy and swearing." He was serious, though. "If I could wave a magnet over the whole Internet, I would do it in a heartbeat," he says. "We all wanted to democratize art. And now that we did, nobody's making money off of art, and art's not as good."

The trend toward musical mediocrity, he thinks, is epitomized by the blogosphere's adulation of guitar-rock bands—"This boring, bland, 'white people' guitar music. It fucking

'If you let the people decide, then nothing truly adventurous ever gets out,' Weingarten says. 'We all wanted to democratize art... and now art's not as good.'

sucks. I hate it. This NPR bullshit"—and singer/songwriters like Conor Oberst and Iron & Wine—"James Taylor for people with hoodies." In bands like these, largely popularized by the Internet hive mind, he finds nothing interesting, nothing daring, nothing necessary.

He often takes refuge in older music. He is currently occupied with acquiring every hip-hop record released between January and December of 1988, which he insists was rap

music's miracle year. He hits one hand into the other, giddy with delight as he lists some bands whose records were released that year. "Public Enemy. N.W.A. Slick Rick. DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince. God, the Marley Marl record. The Kid 'n Play record. It was this period when rappers were still experimenting—Sir Mix-a-Lot! 2 Live Crew! Rap was selling and the studios didn't know why. It was like the movie studios before *Jaws*."

Every couple of months, he spins a set of 1988 hip-hop at a local bar or club. He is proud of his DJ skills, to a point. "I could make it flow, and make it bleed, but I don't really know who the audience is," he says. "I think people want to hear music they know, not Krown Rulers. I had this girl come up to me and say, 'Can you play something I can dance to?' I thought, 'If you can't dance to hip-hop, then the music is not the problem.' Maybe it's me."

He continues to review new records on Twitter, although this year he's not going to force himself to do a thousand. And while 1000TimesYes has brought him exposure and writing opportunities, his financial outlook remains grim. Formerly the drummer in the experimental Brooklyn band Parts & Labor, he has barely played music since 2007, largely because he cannot afford to rent a practice space. He has no health insurance. He collects receipts for all expenses that are even remotely work-related, in hopes of some future reimbursement check or tax deduction. Still, he has defied his #140conf prediction of impending unemployment. "I think I've got another year in me," he says. "Whether I've got another two years? I don't know."

"DOES ANYONE HAVE A GPS?" IT'S THE SECOND DAY OF THIS year's South by Southwest conference (SXSW) in Austin, Texas. Weingarten is sitting in the back of a pedicab, on his way to see the rock band Quasi play an afternoon set at a club called Cheer Up Charlie's, and the pedicab's driver is hopelessly lost. "I've lived here for twenty years," he explains. "Never heard of that street."

Weingarten fumbles with his mobile phone. "GPS is fucking terrible in this town," he says. "In every town, really." Quasi is scheduled to go on at 4 p.m.; it's now about 4:40. Weingarten shrugs. "If we don't see Quasi, we'll see the next band."

The pedicab passes a bar called Café Mundi, and the sound of live music spills through the small crowd congregated outside. Weingarten cranes his head to look. "Who's playing?" he howls. Nobody answers, and he sits back down. The pedicab stops to ask directions from a postman. "You know," Weingarten says, "we can probably hoof it from here."

In early March, Weingarten posted a couple of tweets on 1000TimesYes referring obliquely to an upcoming act of "stunt criticism." It turned out that Rollingstone.com had hired him to tweet-review a hundred concerts over the four-day music portion of SXSW. By the time I met up with him, less than two days into the conference, he had already seen over thirty shows; while the pace wasn't nearly as strenuous as his All Tomorrow's Parties trip in 2008, it was nevertheless beginning to take a mental toll. "They all blur together," he

said. "Things that happened earlier in the day seem to have happened yesterday."

In addition to his Rollingstone.com assignment, Weingarten spoke at two panels during sxsw, one about online tastemakers and music curation, the other about music jour-

'I took something I loved doing and put it in a fun concept that non-nerds could enjoy. But I never dumbed down my writing or compromised my integrity.'

nalism in the post-print era. At both of these, he reiterated the themes he introduced last year at #140conf: the industry is screwed, rock critics are dying, you gotta do what you can to stay alive.

Former *Chicago Sun-Times* rock writer Jim DeRogatis attended the latter panel, and was unimpressed by Weingarten, whose work he dismissed as "verging on annoying gimmickry." Weingarten noted this on his Twitter account, "In other news: One of my absolute favorite music crits called me 'annoying' in the *Chicago Sun-Times*...#killyridols?"

"I mean, what annoys me most is that it comes from Jim—a rock writer who I totally respect and adore," he told me later in an e-mail. "Like, duh, no shit, I'm gimmicky. I mean I basically took something I loved doing—writing about bands—and put it in a fun concept that non-nerds could enjoy. But the thing is, I never dumbed down my writing or compromised my integrity."

When he finally makes it to Cheer Up Charlie's, a cinderblock building on Sixth Street, Quasi is still playing. "Oh, God, what number am I on?" Weingarten asks, to no one in particular. He pulls out a Flip camera and hurriedly makes his way toward the stage. As part of his deal with Rollingstone.com, he is expected to videotape each band he sees from two different angles. "I gotta get the camera out fast," he explains. "If I don't 'get' the band, I don't get to use the review."

It takes him about ten minutes to 'get' Quasi. ("#sxsw 37)QUASI: Sam Coomes seems really psyched to play a sunny, gravelly field on a rickety stage. Maybe he hasn't done it in a while?") He heads out while they're still playing, stopping on the sidewalk to greet an acquaintance. This happens often; sxsw is something of a yearly reunion for America's music critics. "Yo, Julian!" Weingarten exclaims. The two men slap hands.

"What's up, man?" Julian asks.

"I gotta walk."

After a brief stop to hear a Spanish quartet called Delorean ("#sxsw 38)DELOREAN: Fluffy, intimate, bass-bursting glo-punk party in secluded field within throwing distance of a mile-long FADER Fort line"), he stumbles upon a venue called The Music Gym & Lounge, a small bar just east of the highway. An obscure Seattle rap group called Shabazz Palaces is playing a sparsely attended set on the outdoor patio, and for the first time since we met, Weingarten seems surprised by what he's hearing. "Is that a kalimba?" he asks, referring to the wooden thumb piano being played by percussionist Tendai "Baba" Maraire. He bobs his head and grins broadly as he videotapes the group. "This is fantastic!" he says.

There are no more than twenty people at the show. At least half of them are music critics, most of whom seem to know or recognize Weingarten. A bunch of young music writers from Seattle gather around him to introduce themselves as the band finishes up. "I really enjoyed that," one says, talking about the 1000TimesYes project.

"What part?" asks Weingarten.

"The part where you debased yourself for a year on Twitter," says another, smiling.

Although he enjoys being recognized, he is somewhat bemused by the attention. "In the grand scheme of things, I still feel like a fucking nobody," he says. Earlier that day, he ran into Chuck Eddy, a former music editor at *The Village Voice*, who praised Weingarten's tweets. Weingarten is an unabashed Eddy fan—"When the recent Pazz and Jop issue came out, his essay rose above anything in a way that made me worry about the younger generation. Will we ever be able to write that way?"—and he seemed pleased by the words of support. "It's good to be known for something," he told me, Weingarten says.

We exit into streets choked with people working their way back to the main strip, grabbing food and making plans before the evening's shows begin. Eighty-eight official venues have shows scheduled that night, and the bills are laden with popular independent groups like She & Him, Dr. Dog, Miles Benjamin Anthony Robinson, The xx, We Are Scientists, Broken Social Scene, and others. Outside The Music Gym, Weingarten leans against a wall and goes silent as he works to compose his thoughts about Shabazz Palaces' set. "I feel dumb sometimes," he says, "because it's supposed to be just 'Blah! Tweet!'" He ends up giving them 133 characters, and he makes all of them count: "#sxsw 39)SHABAZZ PALACES: Ex-Digable Planet does impossibly funky, dubby avant-rap with shakers, kalimbas, ideas without boundaries." Then, two minutes later, as if realizing that they could use the help, he tweets about them again: "#sxsw 39)SHABAZZ PALACES: Truly a unique and wonderful mix that deserves to be one of sxsw 2010's breakout stars. Get Googling!"

The Seattle crew passes by and waves farewell. Weingarten nods. "See you on the Internet!" CJR

JUSTIN PETERS is CJR's managing editor/Web.

Down the Rabbit Hole

*One reporter's effort to understand
a forty-year-old nuclear accident*

BY BARBARA MORAN

Anouschka and I stood in the parking lot of an empty gas station, leaning against the hood of the rental car. It was hot. In southern Spain, it's always hot. The gas station sat at the base of a curving canyon road; high walls of red rock rose on either side of us, meeting the impossibly blue sky overhead. I listened to Anouschka, my translator, chatter on the cell phone in Spanish. She finished her conversation and snapped the phone shut. "José is coming down

to meet us," she said. "He says we'll recognize him because he looks like an ugly Hugh Laurie."

She paused. "Hugh Laurie is already pretty ugly, no?"

I had come to the Spanish desert in the winter of 2007 to research a book about a cold war nuclear accident. On January 17, 1966, an American B-52 bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs collided with a tanker plane during a mid-air refueling over Spain. Both planes exploded, killing seven airmen and launching the four H-bombs into the sky. Three bombs landed around the small farming village of Palomares. There was no nuclear explosion, but the impact detonated the high explosive in two of the bombs, spreading plutonium for miles. The bombs were quickly recovered, but cleanup of debris and contaminated soil took months. The fourth bomb landed in the Mediterranean, and it took nearly three months—and the largest salvage effort in Navy history—to recover it. The broken arrow at

Palomares is still regarded as the worst known nuclear weapons accident in all history, and the American cleanup remains the subject of considerable controversy in Spain. José Herrera Plaza, an eccentric documentary filmmaker (and Hugh Laurie look-alike) who was coming down the canyon to meet us, was my last chance to find out what exactly had happened in that patch of Spanish desert.

Why was this the case? Why was I, an American journalist, unable to get information about a forty-year-old, publicly acknowledged nuclear accident? The answer is a mixture of politics and bureaucracy, one reporter's quixotic battle against the nearly impenetrable edifice that is the U.S. Department of Energy.

IN 2004, I BEGAN GATHERING INFORMATION for my book about the Palomares accident. One of my goals was to discern the extent of plutonium contamination in Spain and determine if the Spanish or American governments had intentionally concealed its magnitude. I knew this much: after the accident, the United States Air Force made a massive effort to clean up the plutonium, agreeing to remove the most contaminated topsoil and vegetation. For weeks, airmen loaded contaminated dirt and tomato vines into steel drums. In March 1966, they put 4,810 of these barrels onto a Navy ship and sent them to the Savannah River facility, a plutonium plant and nuclear fuel disposal site in South Carolina, for

burial. The United States also helped establish a long-term health monitoring system for the people of Palomares. With these measures completed, most people considered the matter closed.

Unfortunately, the cleanup was incomplete. The most contaminated site, called area #2 because the Americans found the second bomb there, was a steep and rocky stretch on the far outskirts of town. Rather than remove topsoil from area #2, the Air Force—after sometimes tense negotiations with the Spanish government—agreed to turn the dirt with picks and shovels, diluting the plutonium until the radiation count dropped below the level of detection. This left a large swath of Spanish countryside contaminated. *El País*, the largest daily newspaper in Spain, also reported that the Americans had left behind two buried trenches, about ten yards wide and thirty yards long, containing radioactive debris. Area #2 and the mysterious trenches became focal points of my



Collateral damage In 1966, children from Palomares picked tomatoes that were contaminated with radiation.

research. How bad was the contamination? How long had the authorities known about the buried debris? Had there been a cover-up?

Before my trip to Spain, getting information in the U.S. had proven exasperating. I wasn't alone. Many historians, especially those researching nuclear weapons, were frustrated as they tried to access documents during the Bush administration years. An August 2006 article in *The Washington Post*, for example, described how researchers at the National Security Archive, an independent research institute located at George Washington University, were surprised to find cold war statistics on the number of American nuclear weapons blacked out in documents they had obtained. This was curious because the numbers had been published in the past, and more detailed ones had been given to the Soviets during arms control talks. The DOE was known for its openness during the Clinton years, but after 9/11, the Bush administration initiated a massive reclassification campaign,

squirreling away documents that had long been public. My research was caught up in the sweep.

Over the years of researching this book, I filed about thirty Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. As a freelance writer without the backing of a major news organization, I had no clout. But perhaps it wouldn't have mattered if I did. While the law stipulates that organizations must respond to FOIA requests within twenty working days, most of my requests were ignored, delayed, or disappeared. Sandia National Laboratories, a DOE facility that helps manage America's nuclear weapons, proved especially maddening. One FOIA request to Sandia yielded several videotapes—oral histories of scientists and engineers who had investigated Palomares. Two of the videos were so scrambled that they were impossible to watch. When I asked Sandia for clean copies, I was told they couldn't be found. Another FOIA request to Sandia produced a list of unclassified documents relating to the accident. When

American and Spanish officials had known about the excessive plutonium for at least ten years before it was exposed in the press.

I requested several of these documents, I was told they couldn't be found. When I scheduled a meeting with a Sandia archivist during a research trip to Albuquerque, she didn't show up, leaving me drumming my fingers in an empty conference room. Even people, it seems, go missing in the bowels of Sandia National Labs.

Sandia wasn't the only obfuscator. The long arm of the DOE even reached far into the National Archives. Francis Smith, a gunner on the *uss Albany*, the Navy flagship during the ocean search for the fourth bomb, told me that his ship had switched the warheads on their Talos missiles from conventional to nuclear during the Palomares mission. As a lowly gunner's mate, Smith didn't know why his superiors had decided to change the warheads; but to me, the switch signified a significant uptick in the tension level, an important turning point in the narrative. When I went to the National Archives to confirm his story, I found that the deck logs of the *Albany* had been "pulled" by the DOE. Deck logs are the most benign of military documents, recording a ship's position, the weather, the arrival of important guests, and occasional events. They are rarely classified.

When I asked an archivist why the deck logs had been pulled, he shrugged and said he didn't know. Confused, I asked another archivist, who drew me aside and, in a hushed voice, told me that the DOE had pulled anything that mentioned nuclear weapons. I could get the deck logs, but would have to file a FOIA request. I did, and returned to the National Archives a couple of months later, excited to see the juicy details revealed in the *Albany*'s deck logs. Perhaps there had been an incident on the ship, maybe involving the Soviet trawler spying nearby. If the government had gone to the trouble to hide the documents, surely there must be some revelation there. At the archives, I eagerly paged through the logs. For the entire time the *Albany* was cruising off Palomares, I found two entries relating to nuclear weapons, both from March 29, 1966:

8:40 am: Commenced handling Talos missile warheads
10:15 am: Secured from handling Talos missile warheads

Amid such disappointments, there were moments of hope. I received the same airplane accident report from two government sources, each with different sections blacked out.

This allowed me to piece together a fuller account of the crash. At the Washington Navy Yard, I found a box of files and photos about the recovery of the fourth weapon, which various people had claimed were either classified or didn't exist. But despite such finds, by 2007 I was beginning to panic. I still didn't know the levels of plutonium contamination in Spain, the current state of the cleanup, or even the *history* of the cleanup. I couldn't find the scientist in charge. I couldn't find any budget numbers. My attempts at research through normal channels were being blocked or ignored, and I was starting to wonder if I would ever be able to piece together an accurate picture of the botched cleanup and the state of Palomares today. The DOE, and its Spanish counterpart, CIEMAT, were uncooperative. Sections of the DOE Web site relating to Palomares would suddenly disappear after I requested information on them. (Luckily I kept printouts of the Web pages so I could cite the "disappeared" information in my endnotes.) The DOE's Spain Program Manager, Mohandas Bhat, didn't respond to my calls, e-mails, or requests for an interview. Well, that's not exactly true. He replied to one e-mail in late 2006:

Thank you for your interest in the Palomares Program. Please note that the entire Palomares program is conducted by CIEMAT with their scientists working on the projects. Over the years, DOE has been contributing a small portion of the annual costs of the Palomares program. If you wish to obtain further information about the program, please contact CIEMAT directly.

Which I did, of course. And, getting no response, I flew to Madrid, took the Metro to City University station, and trudged nearly a mile to the offices of CIEMAT. In America, whenever a government official stonewalls me, I have a stock response: I go to his or her office and sit outside until someone talks to me. This almost always works. After a couple of hours, the secretary gets agitated and tells someone to get me out of her hair. Sometimes it is a lackey; sometimes it is the actual official. I expected the technique to work in Spain, but I was so wrong. When it comes to ignoring people, Spanish bureaucrats are masters of their art. I sat at CIEMAT for two full days with the secretary offering only the merest acknowledgement of my presence. When I left Madrid for the Spanish desert, I remained empty-handed.

JOSÉ HERRERA PLAZA, A SPANISH WRITER AND FILMMAKER who had been documenting Palomares for years, was my last hope. He pulled up to the gas station where Anouschka and I waited, and unfolded himself from his car. He hadn't been lying about Hugh Laurie. Herrera was tall and lanky, with a bobbing, oversize head and bulging eyes. "I think he has a thyroid condition," whispered Anouschka. We climbed into our car and followed him up the mountain.

At José's house we ate and drank and watched a rough cut of his Palomares documentary. We talked about the town. As José talked, he paced back and forth quickly, his long arms gesturing. He explained how he had become obsessed with Palomares. He believed that the government wanted

the townspeople exposed to plutonium so that scientists could study the long-term effects of plutonium ingestion. He repeatedly called the retired Spanish scientist who had overseen the government's health-monitoring program—the one man who had spoken to me in Madrid—"Dr. Mengele."

Herrera's interpretation of events seemed extreme, but after my failure at CIEMAT, I had no additional information and few Spanish contacts. The next day, after a tour of Palomares—an incongruous town somewhere between a peasant village and a middle-class British holiday resort—we returned to José's house. By this point, he trusted me enough to download several hundred DOE documents onto my laptop. He had gotten these files from the DOE Web site, and I was embarrassed that I hadn't been able to find them myself. But when I returned to the U.S. and typed in the links José had shown me, they were all dead. It's unclear whether José had retrieved the documents years ago, before the post-9/11 reclassification effort, or whether the DOE had blocked parts of its Web site within the U.S. only. Regardless, despite many attempts over the next two years, I was never able to access these links from my computer.

But thanks to José, I already had the goods. I painstakingly pored through his documents until I hit paydirt. Buried among the memos and letters spanning forty years were some damning tidbits. One 1998 memo paraphrased DOE and CIEMAT scientists discussing plutonium contamination and the location of "pits." "Important to recognize that Pu [Plutonium] was left at the site," Spanish scientist Emilio Iranzo is cited as saying. "There were not enough

Of the FOIA requests I filed during the course of my research, about half were ultimately filled after long delays. The rest were simply ignored.

drums to take all the Pu away." The memo proved that American and Spanish officials had known about the buried debris and excessive plutonium for at least ten years before the information was exposed in the press. I had found my cover-up.

After my visit, someone within CIEMAT began leaking information to a reporter at *El País*. I'm not sure if my investigation prompted this new openness, but new revelations about Palomares began to appear in the paper every few months. The Spanish government is now finalizing the expropriation of twenty-one hectares (about fifty acres) of

contaminated land around area #2, to prevent a British company from developing it into a golf resort. And, to compensate the people of Palomares for their suffering, the government has tentative plans to build a theme park in the area. One section of the theme park will showcase the era of nuclear technology, and feature the shell of an American B-52.

MY BOOK, *THE DAY WE LOST THE H-BOMB: COLD WAR, HOT NUKES, and the Worst Nuclear Weapons Disaster in History*, was published last year.

Of the FOIA requests I filed over the course of my research, about half were ultimately filled after long delays; the rest were, as far as I can tell, simply ignored. Without money to hire a lawyer, I had no recourse when government officials chose to sidestep the law. For one important request I got Senator John Kerry's office involved, but despite the efforts of his staff, that request was filled only in November 2009, more than five years after I filed the original request and seven months after my book was published. To be fair, without FOIA I may have never received any of these documents. But for me, it worked only when I was lucky and persistent—and had lots and lots of time.

However, I also learned that there is often a back door to access this kind of information. The U.S. government is a vast, somewhat sloppy organization. Some documents I couldn't get through FOIA I found in boxes and basements. Many people I interviewed gave me papers and photographs that I couldn't get from the U.S. government. Two retired Navy divers, for instance, loaned me publicity photos taken during the recovery that had since disappeared. A retired Sandia engineer with an ax to grind gave me a CD full of maps and memos. Once, a friendly FOIA manager pasted a personal note onto a formal letter, advising me to look for a particular document outside official channels. (Unfortunately, her advice led me to the Sandia archives and a dead end.) And, of course, my documentary filmmaker in Spain gave me a treasure trove of DOE files.

Because I finished the bulk of my research while George W. Bush was still in office, I don't know if the situation has changed under Barack Obama. However, weeks after Obama's inauguration, I began getting calls from newly placed FOIA administrators who apologized for the delays and promised to fast-track some of my requests. In a few cases, this actually happened. Others sank quickly back into the FOIA darkness.

I finished this project with a mixed sense of hope and hopelessness. My original goal was to unearth every important document about this nuclear accident, to tell the definitive history of the event. I may have succeeded, but I doubt it. In coming years, I am sure that more documents will emerge to further illuminate the story. That, I have come to accept, is the nature of history. **CJR**

BARBARA MORAN is a science journalist in Boston. Her first book, *The Day We Lost the H-Bomb: Cold War, Hot Nukes, and the Worst Nuclear Weapons Disaster in History*, was published by Presidio Press, an imprint of Random House, in 2009.





Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

The Reporter Who Time Forgot

How Cornelius Ryan's The Longest Day changed journalism

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

In 1957, an expatriate Irish newspaperman struggling to make a buck after his most recent employer went under began making the rounds of magazine editors and book publishers, hoping to get someone to help foot the bill for a hazily formed idea about a fifteenth-anniversary retelling of the events of June 6, 1944: D-Day. Here was the true, humble, and all-but-forgotten beginning to the modern age of Journalism as Literature.

Over the years the trade had produced occasional flashes of inspiration in which a writer—Daniel Defoe, Rebecca West, Joseph Mitchell, W.C. Heinz, John Hersey—took a turn at bringing to a true story the qualities of fiction. But those moments came, and always went, and did not much alter the journalistic landscape. That began to change in 1957, when Cornelius Ryan, staked by the least hip of all magazines, *Reader's Digest*, began placing ads in newspapers and trade publications, searching for men and women who had been in Normandy that day. From those ads sprung a great journalistic enterprise that would culminate, two years later, with the publication of *The Longest Day*.

The book was a triumph, earning rave reviews and sales that, within a few years, would stretch into the tens of millions in eighteen different languages. And yet, in latter-day journalistic circles, *The Longest Day* is an afterthought—a book recalled not for spawning a revolution but for its big-screen adaptation of the same name, which seems to appear on cable early every June.

Conventional wisdom has it that the uprising that continues to define how so much journalism reads, and how so many journalists prefer to think of themselves, began, like so much else that feels transformative about American culture, in the 1960s. It was then that such icons as Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson began producing so much terrific work that by 1972, Wolfe would look back and proclaim that a “new journalism” had been born. Wolfe took it a step further. He argued that New Journalism—now a decade into its full-blown adolescence—was not only trampling on the flower gardens of the craft’s more sober practices but stomping upon the topiary gem of American letters: the Big Novel.

Wolfe’s essays in *New York* magazine were followed a year later by the publication of the Scouts Handbook for young journalists, his co-edited *New Journalism* anthology. By then, legions of eager reporters had shoved aside the he-said-she-said-can-you-spell-it-for-me ways of the past and embraced the idea that they could bring to their work the sensibilities and techniques of fiction. Novelists, too, had taken up the call, abandoning the garret and loading up on #2 pencils and steno pads before heading out across the land to see with their own eyes and

hear with their own ears. Truman Capote, celebrated as a very hot novelist at twenty-two before finding himself in a creative trough, returned to New York from Holcomb, Kansas, in 1965 proclaiming that with *In Cold Blood*, he had invented an entirely new literary form: the nonfiction novel.

Wolfe had presented a template for the many ways a writer could make a name for himself. And perhaps the combination of that collected work and the pyrotechnics of his prose obscured the larger lesson he preached. Yes, the New Journalism was about attaining in non-fiction the realism that novelists had abandoned, or ignored. But to achieve what Talese and Thompson had accomplished meant performing the very act that Norman Mailer, whose best work was arguably his nonfiction, had dismissed as "chores": reporting.

Wolfe extolled the virtues of immersion, a school of gathering information in which "the basic reporting unit is no longer the datum, the piece of information, but the scene...." To report, he went on, meant hanging out, watching, listening, taking it all in to achieve a novelist effect. But his enthusiasm for the thrill of the hunt came with a warning, offered in the simplest and most sadly overlooked words in his essay: "Reporting never becomes any easier because you have done it many times."

It was easier, then, to focus on the writing. After all, it was in the writing where you could show how you'd sweated. To be regarded merely as a good reporter was to be dismissed as the sort of person in whom the object of one's desire sees only a friend.

So it is not surprising that within a few years of the publication of that essay and anthology, the revolution that Wolfe had evoked with such delight had ground to a halt. In its place would come the very sort of ossification and hewing to convention ("What, no anecdotal lede?") that Wolfe and his cadre had worked so hard to crack. More and more, journalists would trade in the most expedient forms: stylistic flourishes and one-liners and the witty turn of phrase that is the last redoubt of the fellow who, as Faulkner once said, can write but has nothing to say.

The revolution built upon reporting

I was hooked after a single page. Something was taking place in the telling of this story that transcended the journalistic equivalent of mere looks—a richness, a depth.

in service of achieving the feel of fiction was never about the writing, at least not for its own sake. But who cared? So many young journalists, myself included, did not necessarily think of ourselves as reporters.

But Wolfe did. And so did Cornelius Ryan.

I WILL CONFESS TO A ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT to *The Longest Day* that has nothing to do with journalism. It was the first "grown-up" book I read. I was not a reader, but I had seen the movie and watched *Combat!* on TV and, in my pre-Vietnam growing up, was a sucker for war stories. Having dipped in and out of the Landmark young-adult books on great battles and heroes, I was ready for something more. My father, hoping to find a book that might catch me up, handed me *The Longest Day*. It worked; I read. At least, I read that one.

He did it again, for sentimental reasons, in 1978, giving me a new copy after I had moved to Chicago for a newspaper job. I do not recall rereading the book. I was too much in the throes of Wolfe and company and, given where my aspirations lay, did not see how *The Longest Day* and its author could be of much use.

It would take a long time and a good many stories before I began to fall in love with reporting. The realization came as I began to understand that while my writing would after a time improve only incrementally, reporting was a craft that could, if done ambitiously, remain beyond perfecting. The lonely and maddening business of writing could be fueled not by what dexterity with words I could summon but by all the many things I had to find out. I fell in love with reporting only after I was old enough to appreciate that, journalistically speaking, it could keep me young.

Which is what led me back to *The Longest Day*. I had not opened the book in many years. And yet the story, or rather the many small stories that filled the narrative, had stayed with me. I had seen the movie from time to time over the years. It is a remarkably faithful adaptation—Ryan had worked on the screenplay. But was it the film or my early memories of the book that drew me back? Or was it something else entirely: my growing realization that the qualities that made the book endure—the precise details, the way each of Ryan's many set pieces unfolded so quickly, even as the sentences were packed with multiple facts—could come only through an approach to reporting that I had long considered secondary to the words themselves?

I opened the book on the eve of a long weekend. I was hooked after a single page. Something was taking place in the telling of this story that transcended the journalistic equivalent of mere looks—a richness, a depth. A little like love, not as it happens for teenagers, but for adults.

Ryan opens his story in the coastal village of La Roche-Guyon. He lingers there for only two pages, long enough to establish the date (June 4), the weather (gray, misty), and the sounds of dawn (a church bell ending the nighttime curfew and heralding day 1,451 of the German occupation) before introducing his most compelling character, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. When we meet him, the German commander—and D-Day's biggest loser—is awaiting the invasion in the village's castle. It is a neatly accomplished piece of foreshadowing: Ryan sprinkles in his facts without gumming up the machinery, and delivers an implicit promise to the reader. *You want details? You want characters? I've got a million of 'em.*

The author immediately makes good,

tightening his focus on Hitler's most celebrated general:

In the ground-floor room he used as an office, Rommel was alone. He sat behind a massive Renaissance desk, working by the light of a single desk lamp. The room was large and high-ceilinged. Along one wall stretched a faded Gobelin tapestry. On another the haughty face of Duke Francois de la Rochefoucauld—a seventeenth-century writer of maxims and an ancestor of the present Duke—looked down out of a heavy gold frame. There were a few chairs casually placed on the highly polished parquet floor and thick draperies at the windows, but little else.

Nothing slows the eye's journey across the page; the author feels no compulsion to call out, "Look over here, it's me!" And this makes it easy to miss what is so striking about this otherwise simple passage: the efficient accumulation of fact.

We learn that Rommel was a) alone, b) seated at a desk that was c) massive and d) Renaissance and fitted with a single lamp, and that he worked under the gaze of e) Duke Francois de la Rochefoucauld whose face was f) haughty and whose portrait was framed in g) gold. And then, quite subtly, Ryan offers a quick peek at his character: "In particular, there was nothing of Rommel in this room but himself." Not a photograph of his wife (Lucie-Maria) or son (Manfred, age fifteen) or mementos of his great victories in North Africa, such as the field marshal's baton Hitler had presented him (eighteen inches, three pounds, gold, red velvet covered with gold eagles and black swastikas) because such extravagance, Ryan writes, was alien to Rommel, a man who "cared so little for food that he sometimes forgot to eat."

Rommel did not know when the Allies were coming nor where they would land. But, Ryan tells us, his defenses were stretched thin and he decided to return to Germany and plead for more materiel from Hitler. He would stop at home along the way to present a pair of shoes (gray suede, size five and a half) to his wife on her birthday, June 6.

Size five and a half? How did he get that?

CORNELIUS RYAN WAS AT NORMANDY twice on D-Day, the first time on a bomber flying over the beaches, the second time on a patrol boat that took him back after he landed in England. He had turned twenty-four the day before. He had been working as a war correspondent for London's *The Daily Telegraph* since 1943, having come to London from Dublin in 1940, and to journalism a year later at Reuters, after attending a school where he studied violin. He covered the air war over Germany—perilous work—as well as Patton's Third Army, then reported from the Pacific.

In 1947, Ryan moved to the United States, where he became a naturalized citizen and, eventually, a writer for *Time*, *Newsweek*, and, until its demise in 1956, *Collier's*. By then, he had written four books, including two about Douglas MacArthur, and another, *One Minute to Ditch*, about an airliner's ocean landing. He also published a good many

Ryan started reporting on June 6, 1944, and never really stopped.

magazine stories that, taken together, reflected less a budding literary career—"I Rode in the World's Fastest Sub"—than the workmanlike yield of a man who knew how to churn out copy.

But one story did suggest that, given the chance to pursue the best material, Ryan could produce memorable work. In 1956, the liner *Andrea Doria* collided with a Swedish ship off the coast of Nantucket and sank. Ryan set about reconstructing the collision, the rescue of all but forty-six of the ship's 1,706 passengers, and most memorably, the drama of a husband and wife who had switched beds the night before, only to be woken when a beam split their cabin—separating them, as it turns out, forever. The writing was at times overdone. But the reporting, which included the surviving husband's moment-by-moment account of his

wife's demise, was a harbinger of the big projects to come.

Ryan had initially proposed a D-Day book about only the first two or three hours of the invasion. But then he began to report, and his ads ("Personal: Were You There on 6 June 1944?") yielded thousands of responses. He followed up with a three-page questionnaire that could serve as a primer for reconstructing a narrative: Where did you land and at what time? What was the trip like during the crossing? Do you remember, for example, any conversations you had or how you passed the time? Were you wounded? Do you remember what it was like—that is, do you remember whether you felt any pain or were you so surprised that you felt nothing?

One thousand, one hundred, and fifty people wrote back. And of that group, he interviewed, alone or with his assistants, 172. Ryan's daughter, Victoria Bida, told me that her father had once been away for eighteen months reporting, suggesting that to find the man, the reporter, you need look no further than his files. And to read the files—to deconstruct how the book was assembled, to connect names and stories in the book with questionnaires, interviews, letters, diaries, and regimental histories—is to feel yourself in the presence, so many years later, of a man compelled to learn everything.

Here, for instance, was the questionnaire from Lieutenant Donald Anderson of the 29th Infantry Division, who wrote about getting shot: "No pain, just stunned. Figured my brains were spilled all over my helmet." Here was Ryan's interview with General Maxwell Taylor, who commanded the 101st Airborne Division and who told him what it had been like parachuting into a dark field: "Lonesome as hell." And here was the interview with Private Aloysius Damski, a Pole who had been forced to join the German 716th Infantry Division, who told of playing a card game called "scat" on the night before the invasion, then peeling away from his unit so that he could surrender to the British.

Then there was the material on Rommel, who committed suicide in October 1944 after he was implicated in a plot to murder Hitler. Ryan had the general's diaries (nary an entry without comment about his dog) and an interview with his

widow and son. But it was his adjutant, Captain Hellmuth Lang, who proved to be an interviewer's dream. Lang recalled all the many telling details of the morning before the invasion, when Rommel, after a breakfast of tea and a slice of white bread with butter and honey, set out at precisely 6:47 a.m. in a black convertible Horch for his home in Herrlingen, where he would celebrate his wife's birthday before continuing on for his meeting with Hitler. Frau Rommel later produced the birthday-gift shoes, long

carnage that Ryan raced to finish as he was dying.

He had been diagnosed with prostate cancer at fifty, and despite a grim prognosis, had endured the rigors of his treatment and outlived by three years his doctors' grave predictions. But by the spring of 1973, with *A Bridge Too Far* still not done, he wrote to an old friend, the San Francisco columnist Herb Caen, about the burdens of what had been his secret illness, and about the career he had crafted.

When a reporter comes back with something that, as Norman Maclean once wrote, 'tells him something about himself,' readers know it. They feel it on the page and in the prose.

since resoled. And Lang, bless him, recalled the size: five and a half.

But Ryan was not only hunting for the small bits. As it happened, the Germans wanted it known that Rommel was not with his troops on D-Day because he was with the Führer. Not so, Lang told him. He was at home—a discovery that was as thrilling as it was frustrating. Now he would have to rewrite the first chapter, and was already feeling overwhelmed by the task of culling, cataloguing, and deciding how best to use all the material he was gathering. "I do not know how I'm going to do this right now," he wrote his wife Kathryn, a novelist who had also been his most valued aide.

And then, after he was done, he began doing the same thing all over again. Two more books followed: *The Last Battle* (1966), in which he recounted the fall of Berlin, and *A Bridge Too Far* (1974), the story of the Allies' botched attempt to bring the war to a quick end in 1944. The latter is his most poignant and, at times, angry book; the first two, after all, ended in triumph. Like its predecessors, *A Bridge Too Far* tells of the personal courage of so many foot soldiers. But it also recounts the hubris of the commanders who sent those men into battle, an agonizing story of needless

"I am three years late with it and the publishers are screaming," he wrote. "The advances have been spent and we are trying to keep our heads above water with the hope that the book will be finished within the next four to six weeks."

He had sold, he believed, between 25 and 35 million copies of *The Longest Day* and 400,000 hardcover copies of *The Last Battle* in the United States alone. Yet each book had cost him some \$150,000 to research. "I have no less than 7,000 books on every aspect of World War II. My files contain some 16,000 different interviews with Germans, British, French, etc," he wrote. "Then there is the chronology of each battle, 5x7 cards, detailing each movement by hour for the particular work I'm engaged in. You may think this is all a kind of madness, an obsession. I suppose it is."

The books brought him fame and, even after deducting his research expenses, wealth. But as he confessed to Caen, he wished they'd also brought him a measure of professional recognition. "I've never seen myself as a writer but only as a journalist," he wrote. Still, he hoped that his last book might bring him a Pulitzer. The Pulitzer board had not yet established a category for general nonfiction, and Ryan understood that

he would find it hard to compete with academics for the big prize.

"So there's probably little chance that I may be cited for a Pulitzer because so many of these bastards sit on the board," he wrote, "but it would be nice to get one anyway." (For the record, the 1975 prize in history went to *Jefferson and His Time, Volumes 1-5*, by Dumas Malone.)

Ryan was fifty-four when he died in November 1974, survived by his wife, son, and daughter. The material he had gathered in twenty years of reporting about the war went to Ohio University in Athens, where the dean of the College of Communications was an old friend. The collection's curator, Doug McCabe, told me that even now, sixty-six years after D-Day, historians from around the world, as well as the children and grandchildren of men who fought that day, stop by to search through Ryan's papers in the archive center of the library. It is, he said, the most heavily used collection in the center.

Meanwhile, *The Longest Day* was reissued in 1994 for the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day. It still sells—a fact that belies the glaring omission of Ryan's work from so many anthologies of literary journalism, and also offers a powerful lesson for a trade trying to figure out what people will pay to read. There is nothing, it turns out, like a densely reported story propelled by the palpable sense of a reporter chasing his story.

In a sense, Cornelius Ryan started reporting *The Longest Day* on June 6, 1944, and never really stopped. That day, that war, was his story. And when a reporter comes back with something that, as Norman Maclean once wrote, "tells him something about himself," readers know it. They feel it on the page and in the prose, and willingly join along in that relentless need to know, and to make sense of things.

Ryan, it turns out, did learn something of himself in his work, and came to know himself well enough to have it inscribed on his tombstone, beneath his name and the years of his too-short life. A single word: *Reporter*. CJR

MICHAEL SHAPIRO, a contributing editor to CJR, teaches at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. His most recent book, *Bottom of the Ninth: Branch Rickey, Casey Stengel, and the Daring Scheme to Save Baseball From Itself*, has just been issued in paperback.

American Justice

Two distinct takes on the folly of our prison policies

BY SASHA ABRAMSKY

OVER THE PAST CENTURY AND A HALF, prison reformers have generally looked to the South with a mixture of rage, resignation, and despair. Southern prisons were long seen as a national embarrassment: a naked and entirely retrograde abuse of power, all in the name of states' rights. But that changed during the four decades following the election of Richard Nixon, as an increasingly conservative (and often southern) national leadership rewrote the playbook around criminal justice, as it did in so many other areas of our collective life.

With overt racism no longer acceptable, large numbers of voters transferred their allegiance to politicians who made none-too-veiled references to "law and order," "moral decay," and "urban collapse," thereby harnessing white anxieties without ever explicitly talking about race. The respectable fears of Nixon's Silent Majority profoundly altered the national conversation about crime and punishment, drug addiction, policing, and prison expenditures. In so doing, they reshaped the lives of millions of Americans.

Texas, as Robert Perkinson argues in his sprawling, ambitious *Texas Tough*, led the way. "All of Texas's principal institutions—its political and legal systems, its economy and cultural mores—rested on a bedrock fracture: exalted liberty secured through systematic debasement," he writes. "As in other southern polities that later coalesced into the Confederacy, Texas developed criminal justice traditions uniquely suited to the political economy of human bondage."

Perkinson explores the ways in which Texan "justice" evolved its own patterns of behavior. There was the use of courts and prisons to "protect" a postwar white society from freed black slaves and their descendants; the rigid implementation of society's racial caste system behind bars; and a reliance on prisoners' hard labor. The state's jails and prisons encouraged a set of brutal and humiliating punishment rituals: guards were allowed to whip inmates with a leather strap well into the modern era, and rape was widely tolerated as a mechanism of institutional control.

**Texas Tough:
The Rise of America's
Prison Empire**
By Robert Perkinson
Metropolitan Books
496 pages, \$35

**Orange Is the New Black:
My Year in a Women's Prison**
By Piper Kerman
Spiegel & Grau
320 pages, \$25

TEXAS TOUGH (THE TITLE OF WHICH was borrowed from an October 2000 report by the Justice Policy Institute) details a post-1968 sea change in the country's attitude toward crime and punishment. As America became more conservative during that period, national politicians and criminal-justice experts stopped looking to the South as a target for reform. Instead, the region began to be regarded as a no-nonsense paradigm that could serve as a model for the rest of the country.

"After following a southern strategy to the White House," recounts Perkinson, "Republicans began making American criminal justice a lot more southern." Racism and racial stereotyping were core parts of this transformation. But as with so much else that is unpleasant in modern politics, it came with dollops of plausible deniability. The war on drugs, for example, had a racially disproportionate impact. Yet proponents could always claim that the law was color blind, that people were being sentenced to do hard time for their crimes, not their social status.

For Perkinson, this trend reached its zenith during the tenure of George W. Bush. As Texas governor, Bush presided over more executions and built more prisons than any of his peers in other states. As president, he brought many of the worst traits associated with "Texas justice" to the Federal Bureau of Prisons—and, by extension, to the overseas prison camps institutionalized as a core component of the War on Terror. "Remarkably," Perkinson writes, "Mr. Bush twice presided over the largest and fastest-growing prison system in the nation, first as governor, then as president."

And what has been the result of this expansion of Texas-style justice? There are more than two million Americans living behind bars on any given day, many of them for drug offenses that would have been better dealt with via treatment or community service than incarceration. We are stuck with burgeoning state budget deficits as criminal-justice expenditures run amok, and a growing mental-health crisis inside prisons. Even the very landscape has been physically altered by the construction of hundreds of prisons in recent decades, most of them in poor, remote regions of the country.

Perkinson's argument is hardly revelatory. Several other writers, including Marie Gottschalk, Christian Parenti, Jonathan Simon, and (in the interest of full disclosure) myself, have written books exploring the interplay of conservative political movements, many of them originating in the South, with criminal-justice trends. This interplay is crucial for understanding how and why America entered an era of mass incarceration in the early 1970s. Paradoxically, during the very years in which political and cultural freedoms were dramatically expanded, we as a society chose to incarcerate more and more offenders, for longer and longer stretches of time, in worse and worse conditions. Perhaps it's the yin and the yang of modernity: greater freedom and opportunity for the majority, coupled with increasingly coercive responses and deprivations of liberty for the impoverished, recalcitrant minority.

That said, this framework, so useful for understanding nearly four decades of public policy, has recently become somewhat dated. In the post-Bush era, faced with staggering deficits and a resolute populace, many states are starting to roll back their most extreme tough-on-crime policies and sentences. Incarceration rates are flattening, and in some states actually falling, and the federal government is, in fits and starts, recasting the war on drugs as a public-health issue. Even Texas, the poster child for all that is tough in American criminal justice, is taking some baby steps toward improving its prison conditions and limiting the numbers entering the system in the first place.

Still, Perkinson tells a generally compelling (if overlong and occasionally unfocused) story, which blends history, cultural commentary, folklore, and ethnography. Just as important, he tells it in a way that takes readers on an eminently horrifying journey into America's own heart of darkness. We read about inmates suffocated to death in punishment cells known as "holes," and of others fatally beaten on a whim by guards or by other, favored prisoners. Post-Civil War fortunes, the author notes, were regularly amassed on the backs of prison labor. And the businessmen who made these fortunes frequently became the

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Americans have put our faith in the penal system's ability to eradicate addiction, mental illness, poverty, and under-education.

supreme power brokers when it came to shaping the very criminal-justice system that had so lavishly rewarded them.

Some of the horrors documented in *Texas Tough* have at least nominal economic rationales. Others seem entirely senseless, visions straight out of Dante's nine circles of hell. At one point the author examines testimony from the *Ruiz* trial, a famous, lengthy court case that eventually resulted in the entire Texas prison system being declared unconstitutional. Of one particular prison, he writes: "Neglect at the infirmary also led to deprivations by inmates. A young man named Euris Francis, for example, almost died when he lost both arms in a threshing machine, which he had been ordered to use without proper safety equipment. At the hospital, he underwent emergency surgery and had his amputations bandaged. He was then left alone on the ward, where another patient took advantage of his helplessness and raped him. 'The man without the arms was crying,' testified a witness."

You can't make up stuff like this.

AS A GENRE, PRISON WRITING (AS WELL as prison music, photography, and film) has a long pedigree in America. From the earliest days of the republic, citizens, political leaders, and overseas commentators have been fascinated by stories of crime and punishment. Changing attitudes toward religion, toward ideas of redemption, even toward sexual mores, can be charted by exploring shifting criminal justice trends, or by listening to the songs written and sung by prisoners over the centuries.

Piper Kerman's beautifully written *Orange Is the New Black* is destined to become a classic in this genre. In its introspective tone, it is more similar to South African anti-apartheid activist Albie Sachs's *Jail Diary* than it is to, say,

Mumia Abu-Jamal's denunciatory communiqués from Pennsylvania's death row. From time to time she does lambast The Man, mocking the absurdities of current incarceration practices and the politics behind them. Yet the bulk of Kerman's narrative is a journey of self-discovery, describing how one can find one's true strengths during moments of adversity. It is akin to the great blues songs, written by Lead Belly and other prisoner-troubadours, which Perkinson quotes so admiringly in his work on Texas.

As a young woman fresh out of Smith College, Kerman got marginally involved with an international drug-smuggling ring. For a few months, she couriered bags of dirty money around the world. Then, disillusioned with the lifestyle, and increasingly aware of the insane risks she was taking, she cut off her connections with the underworld. Ten years later, her old crimes caught up with her. She was indicted, accepted a plea deal (very capably negotiated by her private attorney), and was sentenced to fifteen months in a women's federal prison.

Kerman is a rarity among the hundreds of thousands of men and women living out their youth and middle age behind bars for playing supporting roles in the epic drama that is the modern-day drug trade. She was white, educated, affluent, with a strong support structure out in the free world. Her felony conviction was unlikely to block the way to further employment opportunities after her release. But inside Danbury, the low-security prison in Connecticut to which she was sent, she became a number like every other prisoner: 11187-424.

Part of what makes the book so readable is the fact that Kerman isn't consumed with self-pity. Nor does she stress how different she was from the other inmates. In fact, she notes gleefully that there were certain improbable simili-

ties between the privileged, all-female environment of a liberal arts college and that of a women's prison.

"There was less bulimia and more fights than I had known as an undergrad," she recalls, "but the same feminine ethos was present—empathetic camaraderie and bawdy humor on good days, and histrionic dramas coupled with meddling, malicious gossip on bad days."

Where Perkins has the outside observer's eye for macro detail (sometimes in overwhelming quantities), Kerman takes readers through her own bizarre, depressing, sometimes hilarious, and deeply touching interactions within the federal prison system. It's an interesting companion work to *The Man Who Outgrew His Prison Cell*, penned by former bank robber Joe Loya, and to Ted Conover's *Newjack*, the chronicles of an undercover journalist working as a correctional officer in Sing Sing.

The juxtaposition between *Texas Tough* and *Orange Is the New Black* is fascinating, and makes them well worth reading together. Perkins writes mainly about male prisoners, and the closer he gets to the contemporary era, the more he focuses on the abysmal conditions in high-security facilities. Kerman focuses on female prisoners—a population often ignored in recent prison literature, with notable exceptions being Silja Talvi's *Women Behind Bars* and Jennifer Gonnerman's *Life on the Outside*. And she writes about low-security inmates, who occupy a whole different (if still debilitating) universe.

In contrast to Perkins's litany of horrors, Kerman details a world where boredom, or the inability to laugh at the unintentionally absurd, is a more pervasive threat to one's integrity than being shanked on the way to chow hall or raped in the showers. *Orange Is the New Black* documents the author's attempts to preserve her individuality in the face of a gray, impersonal bureaucracy—one based around prisoner counts, strip searches, rules governing the minutiae of life, and continual reminders that prisoners, by definition, have no power, no real autonomy.

"Time was a beast, a big, indolent immovable beast that wasn't interested in my efforts at hastening it in any direction," she writes of the strange daily

rhythms of life behind bars. Later in the book, she observes, "No one who worked in 'corrections' appeared to give any thought to the purpose of our being there, any more than a warehouse clerk would consider the meaning of a can of tomatoes, or try to help those tomatoes understand what the hell they were doing on the shelf."

Perkins describes a world of gangs and rigid racial loyalties, where weakness invites predators to "turn out" inmates in a series of unfathomably violent rapes. Kerman, by contrast, explores the formation of prison "families," complex relationships in which some women become "mothers," others become "daughters" or "sisters." Her book is punctuated with touching rituals: new prisoners being provided with soap, shower shoes, and other necessities by a "welcome committee" of old-timers, or mothers interacting with their children during vis-

Our policies have turned America into the world's busiest jailer.

iting hours. Holidays like Mother's Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving take on huge import, opportunities to decorate the dull, institutional walls and to fantasize about lives unfettered by prison regulations. And Kerman dwells on the small joys of her incarceration, whether it's an illicitly cooked dinner or jogging in the prison yard, the cacophony of her surroundings drowned out by her favorite radio show playing through her commissary-issued headphones.

THE STORY OF AMERICA'S MODERN-day experiment with mass incarceration—a process that has, over the past forty years, turned the country into the world's busiest jailer—is overwhelmingly a saga of futility. The more people we lock up, the angrier we get when criminals continue to commit crimes. And our response seems to exemplify

the old definition of madness: repeating the same thing over and over again while hoping for different results. We ramp up our criminal-justice expenditures and build more prisons. The war on drugs in particular has wasted hundreds of billions of dollars over the past decades, pursuing pointless and stunningly punitive solutions to intractable social problems.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, we have put our faith in the penal system's ability to eradicate addiction, mental illness, poverty, and under-education. That it has failed to do so ought to surprise nobody. Prisons, as both Perkins and Kerman relate, are unpleasant places, institutions where conditions range from miserable to downright deadly.

No doubt there are some people so violent, so predatory, so dangerous to the broader society that they need to be incarcerated. But the premise that society is best served by locking up an ever-increasing swath of the population strikes me as an absurdity. Neither the mores of the Texas Department of Corrections nor the routines of Danbury truly rehabilitate people or prepare them for a law-abiding, functional second act in the outside world.

Want to know how to vote the next time a politician runs on a gimmicky "tough-on-crime" platform? Read *Texas Tough* or *Orange Is the New Black*—or both. And then, if you really want to be tough on crime, vote for better funding for drug-treatment centers, for more money for schools and after-school programs, for job-training opportunities for poor kids on the cusp of adulthood. Alternatively, you could vote to lock up more people. But then you must hope against hope that this time around, your hard-earned tax dollars won't simply churn out more damaged ex-cons with no economic prospects and a whole lot of bitterness to bring back into their communities. And as Perkins and Kerman both suggest, that's more likely a delusion than a realistic hope. **CJR**

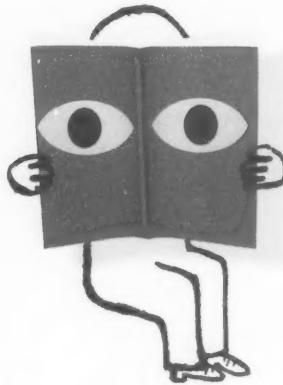
SASHA ABRAMSKY is the author of *American Furies: Crime, Punishment and Vengeance in the Age of Mass Imprisonment* (Beacon Press, 2006). His most recent book is a profile of President Obama titled *Inside Obama's Brain* (Penguin Portfolio, December 2009).

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

BY JAMES BOYLAN

**Getting It Wrong:
Ten of the Greatest
Misreported Stories in
American Journalism**
By W. Joseph Campbell
University of California Press
284 pages, \$60, \$24.95 paper

AS W. JOSEPH CAMPBELL shows, there are many ways to misreport. Sometimes it means getting the story wrong in the first place, sometimes misremembering the story, sometimes inflating it later for self-aggrandizement. The author's ten case studies include examples of each. He offers four instances where the original coverage was wrong: the dissemination of unchecked and false horror stories after Hurricane Katrina; the faddish coverage that produced a nonexistent epidemic of permanently injured "crack babies" in the late 1980s; the fabricated glorification of Private Jessica Lynch as the first heroine of the second Iraq war; and the creation in the 1960s of the bra-burning metaphor to characterize feminists (although, scrupulously, Campbell notes that just a single bra might have been burned, once). The more complex analyses center on distorted or false history. Did William Randolph Hearst send the telegram to Frederic Remington in 1897 promising to provide a war? Did Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* broadcast in 1954 bring down Senator Joseph R. McCarthy? Did *The New York Times* kill a story about the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961? Did Walter Cronkite's critique of the Vietnam War



after the 1968 Tet offensive lead LBJ to abandon the presidency? Did Woodward and Bernstein undo Richard Nixon? In each of these cases, the author debunks what is essentially historical hearsay. The value of these studies is less in the answers, which are telegraphed early on, than in the detailed and illuminating research Campbell has applied to each.

**Necessary Secrets:
National Security, the Media
and the Rule of Law**
By Gabriel Schoenfeld
W.W. Norton & Company
320 pages, \$27.95

ACCORDING TO GABRIEL Schoenfeld, this book arose from his anger when, in 2005, *The New York Times* disregarded a White House plea and published details of a secret (and arguably illegal) National Security Agency phone-tapping program. He believed, and still believes, that the paper should have been prosecuted for this alleged breach. Yet Schoenfeld, a public intellectual associated with the Hudson Institute, did not let his wrath stand in the way of

writing a book that is mostly moderate in tone and often very informative. From its beginnings, notes the author, the U.S. government has contended with unauthorized leaks, most of which did little lasting harm and the publication of which went unpunished. Even

the Espionage Act of 1917, enacted shortly after the U.S. entered World War I, proved less than effective in punishing the press, partly because it required proof of ill intent. Nor did the *Chicago Tribune's* disclosure early in World War II that the United States had broken Japanese codes lead to prosecution. But in 1950 Congress passed the obscure Comint (for "Communications Intelligence") Act, which Schoenfeld sees as admirably suited to punish such transgressions as those of the *Times*. Of course, the Bush administration declined to use this handy tool, allowing the paper to get away unscathed. And Schoenfeld recognizes the potential drawbacks of such a prosecution, as symbolized by "the spectacle of FBI agents raiding the nation's premier newspaper, hauling away computers and file cabinets, and frog-marching a shackled Bill Keller into court." He concludes that the Bush administration was following a well-known maxim: "Do not pick a fight with those who buy ink by the barrel."

**Beyond the Killing Fields:
War Writings**
By Sydney Schanberg
Compiled and edited by
Robert Miraldi
Potomac Books
228 pages, \$27.50

JUST AS THE REAL-LIFE Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were displaced to a degree by their film counterparts, Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, in *All the President's Men*, so the real Sydney Schanberg has been overshadowed by Sam Waterston's depiction in *The Killing Fields*. This collection helps to bring the real Sydney Schanberg back to the fore. Its centerpiece is the 1980 article from *The New York Times Magazine* about Schanberg's loss and recovery of his steadfast Cambodian colleague, Dith Pran, an account even more wrenching than the film version. But the book contains much more: stories and analyses from the decade when, as the author recalls, his life "turned into a war assignment" in Laos, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and, of course, Cambodia. He confesses that he still hears the siren call of war, and not only for the adrenaline rush it produces in the correspondent. Writes Schanberg: "The people should be told and shown—even if they wish to turn their eyes away—what is being waged in their name." CJR

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the Columbia Journalism Review and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Black Editor, Gray Lady

Gerald Boyd, Jayson Blair, and journalism's diversity problem

BY HOWARD W. FRENCH

THE ENTIRE ARC OF GERALD BOYD'S remarkable life is contained in the first few pages of his posthumous memoir, *My Times in Black and White*. In the opening paragraphs, he sketches out his duties as second-in-command in the newsroom—a job that had once seemed unimaginable for “a little black boy from the streets of poor St. Louis.” We are still in the prologue when Boyd is summoned to the fourteenth-floor suite of Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the paper’s publisher, one afternoon in June 2003.

By this point, only one dream remained for the fifty-two-year-old Boyd: to ascend to the post of executive editor. This would be the final, defining triumph in the classic life of an American striver. Instead, he was abruptly dismissed as managing editor, and cut loose by the institution that had defined his life, *The New York Times*.

The Jayson Blair scandal had exploded earlier that spring, and Sulzberger was desperate to shield the *Times* from further damage. Unfortunately, two separate feeding frenzies had already been set in motion. One involved the schadenfreude of industry competitors, who were delighted to see America’s greatest newspaper being brought low by a reporter who plagiarized and made things up. The other fueled a head-hunting expedition within the company itself, whose goal was to bring down a hard-driving (and now widely hated) executive editor—and along with him, his deputy, a black man who had dared to dream about reaching the very top.

As recounted by Boyd, the scene in Sulzberger’s office is brief, yet it packs an electric tension. In sum, the publisher did little explaining. Boyd, like his boss, Howell Raines, had to go. At the time, the dismissed man was unable to muster even a single question.

In retrospect, Boyd (who died prematurely of cancer in 2006) imputes his downfall to a crude act of racial association. Both he and Blair, the troubled young reporter at the heart of the plagiarism scandal, were black: if Blair were guilty, then Boyd must have been guilty of something, too.

Many people will be drawn to this book for its implicit promise of behind-the-scenes gossip about the *Times*. Their curiosity is understandable—although the pa-

**My Times in Black and White:
Race and Power at
The New York Times**
By Gerald M. Boyd
Lawrence Hill Books
402 pages, \$26.95

per is an institution committed to openness, transparency, and accountability in public life, its own internal workings can be often as difficult to parse as, say, procurement at the Pentagon.

Many others, of course, will consider this story old news—to the relief, one suspects, of various higher-ups at the paper. Boyd himself gained clarity on many things during his final, ruminative years. But perspective about the lasting importance of the Jayson Blair affair was not one of them. He seemed to imagine that historians would long remember the scandal that brought him down.

They will not. The industry has undergone such radical transformations since then, between the rise of the Internet and the gradual, agonizing death of the old newspaper business model, that the details of this episode already feel like ancient history.

This observation takes little away from Boyd’s book, which strongly deserves to be read. *My Times in Black and White* manages the rare feat of pulling off at least three distinctive narratives without any of them feeling forced or contrived.

The first of these is an affecting up-from-poverty story of the sort that used to be common in American letters. Boyd traces his family from places like Itta Bena, Mississippi, where they were Delta cotton farmers, to inner-city St. Louis, where the author wore painstakingly patched clothing and played with toys from the Salvation Army.

Boyd’s trajectory was lifted by Upward Bound, a forgotten element of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. While he was still a teenager, Boyd was placed in an integrated summer program on a college campus, where he became the layout editor of the program’s newspaper.

“I had always liked writing, but I had never experienced the high that came from having my words in a newspaper,” he recalls. “I could be angry or didactic or whimsical and light-hearted. And I could hide behind my byline, engaging and enraging readers as I saw fit.... I knew what I wanted to do with my life.”

Boyd next attended the University of Missouri, where he studied journalism on a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* scholarship and met his first wife, Sheila Rule, who would precede him in building a distin-

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The top Boyd, with Raines, left, choosing photos for 9/11 coverage.

guished career at the *Times*. At this point, the coming-of-age tale, so redolent of the late civil-rights era, morphs into a very different but no less effective narrative: that of the ambitious reporter breaking into the industry, learning tough lessons, paying dues, and enduring a series of broken relationships.

Thanks to our peculiar American malady (and to the book's subtitle), the responses of many readers to this portion of the narrative will be conditioned by their interest in race. That is unfortunate. Boyd's account of life as a young reporter is one of the best I can recall, and though he is unmistakably black, his tale is utterly universal.

At Missouri, Boyd studied journalism and political science, believing that a second degree would make him more marketable. There he discovered the basic creed common to strong reporters: "A good journalist needs only a keen interest in a particular subject. Curiosity plus legwork becomes expertise."

In June 1972, following two summers as a copyboy at the *Post-Dispatch*, Boyd was upgraded to student reporter. On his first day, he asked the city editor where he should sit. "I don't give a fuck," came the brusque reply. Retreating to the back of

the newsroom, he found an empty desk, and was eventually given an assignment. "My hands were shaking as I began to hunt and peck the keys to type my first story," he writes. "Don't let me screw up, I offered a silent prayer to God. Don't let me screw up."

After graduation, Boyd was hired. Strolling into the newsroom, he was still nervous, but already harbored ambitions "to win a Pulitzer Prize, to make a million dollars, and to grace the cover of *Time* magazine—all in my first year." His editors had other plans, assigning him to a succession of fires and homicides. A mentor told the discouraged novice that talent matters, "but it is never the sole factor in success," preparing him for a prolonged immersion in office politics.

As it happened, professional breakthroughs would come quickly for Boyd. After a mere two years at the paper, he became the first black reporter to cover city hall for a mainstream St. Louis publication. Soon after, he was named journalist of the year by the *Post-Dispatch* and the *Globe-Democrat*—another first for an African-American. By 1978, he was working at the paper's Washington bureau. In quick succession, Boyd would cover the Reagan White House, win a

Nieman Fellowship (youngest ever), and be recruited by *The New York Times*.

His job interview with the legendary *Times* editor A. M. Rosenthal went off without a hitch. But when Boyd was ushered into the office of Rosenthal's deputy, Jimmy Greenfield, to discuss salary and other details, he was served up with an instant indignity: "I really enjoyed your clips—they're so well written. Did you write them yourself, or did someone write them for you?" On the heels of this exposure to what he calls "the ugly underside of life at the *Times*," Boyd (like other black reporters of this era, myself included) was assigned to the euphemistically named "urban affairs" beat.

There would soon be other slights, including those that came in the form of compliments. "You're our Jackie Robinson," Boyd was repeatedly told by his superiors. When he was promoted to the Washington bureau, an editor asked him if he were "ready" to begin reporting. Later, when offered the post of Atlanta correspondent, Boyd was told he was perfect for the job, since he could "cover the South as a black man."

Nonetheless, Boyd continued his remarkable rise. When he was assigned anew to the White House, he writes, "I did not feel as if my race had anything to do with my getting the post."

Here the narrative enters its trickiest territory, for if race worked to undo Boyd's career, it had just as clearly helped make it. He had been the beneficiary of a special brand of affirmative action, fast-tracked by a management suddenly sensitive about its own stark lack of diversity.

This, of course, was unfair to the highly capable Boyd from the start. As his colleague Bernard Weinraub recounts, he was saddled with a double burden: "to represent his race and create the best journalism." Boyd's leapfrogging ascent in an intensely competitive environment stirred powerful resentments, which found in the Blair scandal the kind of socially acceptable cover it needed to surface.

As a younger African-American peer of Boyd's, I know something of the dynamics of racial resentment at the *Times*. When I was assigned to cover the Caribbean in 1990, certain white colleagues grumbled openly that I owed my promo-

tion to affirmative action—even though I spoke French and Spanish and was busily learning Creole, and had done successful stints in Haiti amid outbreaks of political upheaval. Later, my very first conversation with a new foreign editor consisted of a telephoned shouting-down about calling the newspaper racist (I had not) over its Africa coverage.

Someone who did not know him well might well be surprised to learn of Boyd's student militant phase, when he briefly adopted the name Uganda X. By the time he became entrenched at the *Times*, he had shed common manifestations of black identity in favor of the corporate culture. He armored himself with a firmly buttoned-down style, ironic repartee, and an inscrutable poker face, of which he was proud. "I became proficient at getting more from others than I gave to them," he writes.

An abiding irony of the Blair scandal—and of the rap that Boyd had been his "rabbi"—is that he was always leery of being cast as the "editor for blacks." Nor was he especially involved in nurturing people of his race, not that this should have been required. A newspaper more serious about diversity would have shared that responsibility widely throughout management.

There are moments in this book where Boyd rues having allowed the *Times* to so dominate his identity. In the end, his strategy of being the consummate company man proved to be a dubious survival technique.

Still, his account provides a timely opportunity for a beleaguered industry to think deeply about diversity. The *Times* seems to favor blacks who don't make whites feel uncomfortable—as even Boyd did from inside his cocoon of inscrutability. In practice, this suggests that only the most thoroughly assimilated minorities (politically, culturally, some would even say physically) get in the door or get ahead.

If this is diversification, one might wonder, what's the point? CJR

HOWARD W. FRENCH is a former senior writer and foreign correspondent at *The New York Times*, who covered Central America and the Caribbean, West and Central Africa, Japan and the Koreas, and China. He is currently an associate professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.



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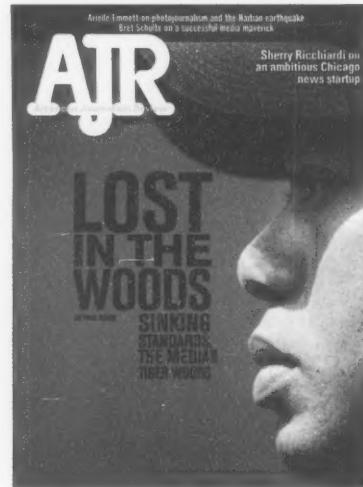
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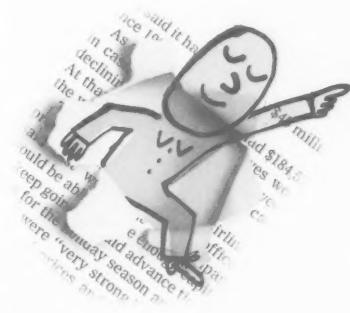
BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND JULIA SONNEVEND

IF YOU THINK ABOUT EUROPEAN PRINT media at all, you are likely to think of newspapers that stake out ideologically precise points along the political spectrum from left to right, in contrast to an American press that is much more solidly committed to detached, objective reporting that balances the views of major parties—a Republican for every Democrat, a defense attorney for every prosecutor; and, in general, *reporting* rather than European advocacy.

But Rodney Benson, associate professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, sees things differently. In “What Makes for a Critical Press? A Case Study of French and U.S. Immigration News Coverage,” published in the January issue of the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, Benson finds that the papers of Paris approach the news in ways more likely than U.S. papers to display a variety of viewpoints on major issues of the day. Benson chose for his comparative study the case of immigration politics, which recently have been surprisingly similar in France and the U.S., and found that Parisian newspapers offered more criticism of the government’s position on immigration across hundreds of news stories examined than did leading American newspapers. Focusing on years in the 1990s and 2000s when conflicts over immigration were heightened, he found that the French media offered “more than twice as many critical statements as U.S. coverage.”

This is not just because the French news stories were longer (although they were); if you compare criticisms per thousand words of text, the French still provide 60 percent more criticisms. Why? Benson acknowledges a variety of relevant differences that may help explain his results, but perhaps his most intriguing claim is that it is partly a matter of format. French newspapers are far more likely to provide what he calls “article ensembles” on the front page on significant public controversies—and these ensembles make an effort to give voice to a variety of viewpoints and perspectives on the topic at hand. U.S. newspapers do this sort of thing much more rarely.

It is not, Benson concludes, that the French press is “partisan” and the U.S. press “objective.” Instead, says Benson, the French press is “more ‘engaged’ with



In this column, the authors cull current scholarly writing about journalism for fresh ideas. Suggestions for possible mention are welcome at editors@cjr.org

partisan politics than the U.S. press and more likely to hold one or the other of the dominant parties accountable for their words and actions. In contrast, U.S. journalists were primarily critical of government as a bureaucratic institution, both reflecting and perhaps helping to reproduce antistatist attitudes.”

The French newspapers are more critical of government, Benson notes, despite the fact that they receive a variety of direct and indirect government subsidies. Within the French press, the papers most economically independent of government—those with the most advertising income—are no more critical than newspapers with less advertising.

Is greater criticism greater journalistic virtue? This seems to be Benson’s subtext, but his findings can be read differently. It may simply be a matter of different countries, different cultures. As Benson suggests, it is part of journalistic tradition in France to emphasize “reasoned debate among elites,” and part of U.S. journalistic culture to take for granted “narrative-driven formats,” often focused on persons and personal attributes rather than ideas and ideologies. (And the U.S. press reaches notably more people than the French—in 2000, 264 sales per thousand adults compared to 190 in France.) These differences may come from deep patterns in the two societies—when Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he found that Americans “displayed a less active taste than the French for generalizations. That is above all true for political generalizations.”

There’s a lesson here, not so much that we should (or even could) adopt French ways, but that our journalism is shaped by American habits that have little to do with natural human inclinations to storytelling and nothing to do with righteous orientation to truth and fairness. U.S. journalism is not an observer and arbiter of American ways but it is itself an American way, a set of practices shaped by the very culture it seeks to examine from the outside. CJR

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The Lower Case

Bush, Clinton visit devastated Haiti

Rochester (NY) Democrat and Chronicle 3/23/10

Nimitz Dicks in Hong Kong Despite Tense U.S.-Sino Relations

Slate 2/17/10

An earlier version of this post misquoted Mr. Remnick on his comparison between the book and a New Yorker article he had previously written. He said the book would not be a “pumped up” version of the article; he did not say that it would not be a “pimped out” version of the article.

The New York Times 2/22/10

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The Bellingham (WA) Herald 2/4/10

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The Des Moines Register 3/16/10

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The Philadelphia Inquirer 2/3/10

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